Rocking Moon

By

Barrett Willoughby

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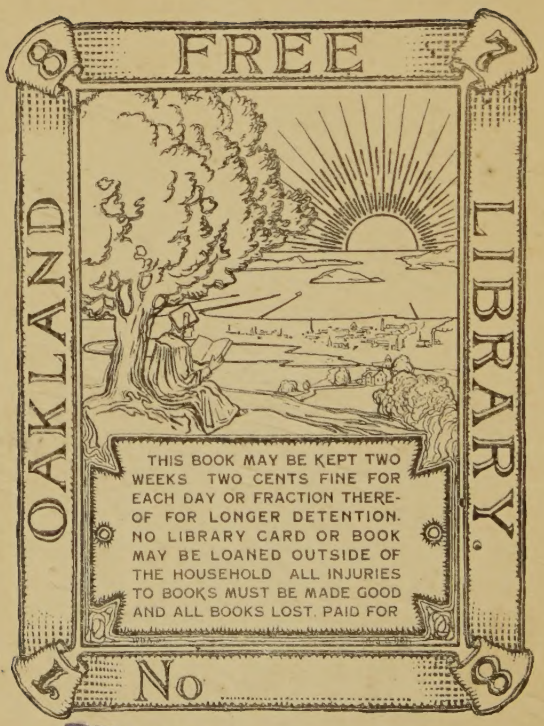
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DIMOND BRANCH

ROCKING MOON

A Romance of Alaska

By BARRETT WILLOUGHBY

AUTHOR OF

"Where the Sun Swings North."

OAKLAND
NOV 1928
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By Barrett Willoughby

Where the Sun Swings North

Rocking Moon

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TO

ANDREW PETER KASHEVAROFF

From the shores of Alaska, Eighteenth Century Russia speaks today in the Byzantine domes of lonely little churches, in the sturdy, squared-log houses shaped by the axes of Baranoff's men, in the old-world courtesy and hospitality of those Alaskans who still retain the speech and manner of their ancestors, adventuring cavaliers sent out from the splendid court of Catherine the Great to colonize this northern land.

It is to such an Alaskan that I dedicate my book.

Barrett Willoughby.

Kodiak, Alaska.

ROCKING MOON

Catalogued 1928

ROCKING MOON

CHAPTER I

THE great, hewed-log house, still known in the Alaskan village as the Governor's House, stood high on a green knoll overlooking the Harbor of Rezanoff. It cast a long morning shadow across the grass before its deep veranda—a shadow which ended just at the rim of the knoll where an old Russian cannon thrust itself out over the red roofs of the trading-post on the beach below.

The suns of a hundred and twenty-eight summers have sparkled on the island-dotted Harbor since Alexander Baranoff, the little Czar of the Pacific, placed that cannon there. It is the last of twenty that once guarded this far northern village of Rezanoff from the attacks of hostile Aleuts when the vast country now called Alaska was lettered on the charts of the old navigators as "Russian America."

The other nineteen cannon are gone, no one knows where. By the aid of "powder and shot and the help of God" the Aleuts are a tamed and vanishing race; and the Governor's House, whose walls once rang to the toasts and laughter of adventurous nobles from a Russian court, is the dwelling of Nicholas Nash, the

young bachelor owner of the Rezanoff Trading Company. Yet the Muscovian influence lingers and, though the flag-staff has felt the tug of the Stars and Stripes for fifty-five years, the peak of the roof's wide center gable is still surmounted by a large iron bust of Catherine the Great, that Empress of all the Russias, to whose enlightenment and liberality the exploration of Alaska was largely due.

Calm, imperturbable, she basks in the sunshine of Alaska's summers; rusts and reddens in the autumn fogs that drift down from Bering Sea, and braves the snows and blizzards of Alaska's winters, just as she did a century ago when Rezanoff was the greatest fur depot in the New World.

In the past her iron eyes have watched a thousand Aleuts line their bidarkas * along the beach below and kneel with heads bowed to the sand while priests in robes of scarlet and gold sprinkled them with holy water and a vested choir of native boys chanted a blessing on the hunt—a blessing which rose above the sobs of the assembled wives and mothers. Her iron ears have heard the brown women weeping because of the danger that lay out there in the storm-beaten kelp-beds, where the outlaw hunters of Baranoff guided the brown men to hunt the *morski bobrov*—the sea-otter—whose fur was the fur of emperors and nobles and precious enough to bring about the colonization of this savage land. She has heard the chimes of the old Greek Church on the hill herald the triumphant return of those Russian hunters in deep-laden galiots, convoyed by half a thousand bidarkas, all sailing in

* Bidarka—a decked-over canoe made of skins, with two or more man-holes in the top.

across the Harbor to unload a priceless cargo into the very log warehouses which form part of the trading-post today.

She has seen the Americans come, and the Russians depart, and the Aleuts die. There are those among the creoles—the half caste Russians—who say that the Iron Empress knows all that goes on below her, and that she still watches jealously to guard the interests of the few Muscovian families remaining in the village.

But there are others, like Colonel Jefferson Breeze, who consider the bust on the old gable but a menace to the safety of anyone who unwarily puts himself in line with its possible fall. The Colonel was standing now on the green before the Governor's House, his middle-height figure listing slightly as he leaned on a cane of mastodon ivory. He had not the slightest claim to the title of Colonel, never having been inside a barracks, but as he often explained, any man not a nonentity eventually acquires some kind of a title in Alaska.

"I tell you, Nicholas, my boy," he boomed in stentorian tones to the young man sprawling in a steamer-chair just outside the veranda, "that Rooshian Empress will tumble down offen that roof some day and kill—you—dead. Sure as God made little apples she will. Get your chair in under the porch." Colonel Jeff used his lower lip almost exclusively in talking, which habit gave him—even on the most serious occasions—the confidential look of one just about to tell a *risqué* story.

He finished his warning with a swift upward look at the Iron Catherine, wrinkles radiating from his kind, brown eyes, his bulbous nose shining between the two deep lines that marked off his humorous, well-formed

mouth. A grunt being the only response to his words, he resumed his former attitude of thoughtful contemplation, one booted foot crossed over the other.

An old khaki hunting-coat, fastened only by the bottom button, strained at the apex of a generous abdominal region. A traveler's cap with an enormous peak tilted jauntily on his gray hair with an effect that was somehow duck-like. But notwithstanding his girth, Colonel Jeff's face was clean-cut and his tanned skin the fine texture of a boy's.

He had turned his back on the unresponsive young trader in the steamer-chair and, with thumb and forefinger pinching his lower lip, had focused his eyes on the figure of another man lying unconscious on the grass before him.

"Nick," he said presently, "blamed if I like the way this chap here continues to stay knocked out. I wish the doctor would get through with Feodor—that no-account, pusillanimous scab on the tail of humanity—and get around to look this fellow over. He hasn't budged since we carried him up here from the dock." With lowered chin the Colonel peered down over his glasses at the object of his anxiety.

A tall young man with wide shoulders and lean, strong-looking limbs lay with his head pillowed on an air-cushion from a launch. Hair of intense black swept back from a pale, high forehead; and, whether from necessity or intent, Nature had for some time been allowed to take its course in the matter of beard. This, though dark and thick, failed to conceal a lump on the jaw. A smock of coarse, nondescript material was belted about the man's waist with an old suit-case strap. Faded blue overalls and boots of thin leather,

knee high and obviously of Russian make, completed a costume which clung to him damply.

"Oh, he'll come round all right, Colonel. You can't kill that breed." The occupant of the steamer-chair laughed carelessly. "I never saw such a tough-looking baby in my life. Looks like a Bolshevik to me."

The Colonel was silent for a moment. Very deliberately he tucked his cane under his arm, drew from his tight coat pocket a briar pipe, and inserted it in his mouth. He reached inside his coat, produced a fat, banded cigar, upended it in the bowl of the pipe and while applying a lighted match to the tip, drew violently on the pipe-stem, working his lips so energetically that the dewlap under his chin trembled. A volley of smoke announced a satisfactory draught.

"W-e-l-l, I admit he does bear the facial characteristics of a malamute pup, Nick." The Colonel turned again toward the veranda and spoke slowly, between puffs of the keenest enjoyment, projecting his words from under the pipe-stem by a sideways manipulation of his lower lip.

"But I'm telling you," he went on, "no Bolshevik would have jumped overboard to save that wretched, low-flung upstart of a Feodor. Of course, it's my own fault—my own fault entirely. When we left the Island of Rocking Moon this morning for those supplies for Sasha, I promised her I'd keep an eye on that devil half-breed, but Great Mahogany Ghost! How was I to know that I'd find the *Starr* in from the West-'ard, with my old tillicum, Spider Peach, captain of her? I tell you, Nick, my boy, we hadn't any more'n got the *Simmie and Ann* roped to the dock before that onery, ossified son-of-a-gun Feodor scrambled

aboard the Big Swede's schooner lying just offen the stern of the *Starr*. Said he was going after a herring net the Swede had borrowed!" The Colonel took his pipe from his mouth and gave vent to a violent, one-syllable snort. "Herring net be blowed! He got a whiff of the Swede's *macoola* barrel, and ever since Father Anton went away, Feodor's been rarin' for a spree. I'll swear, Nick, I hadn't been talking to Spider more'n twenty minutes, when there comes the dummedest racket you ever heard. We rushed aft just in time to see the Swede with a capstan-bar and Feodor with a bottle. That devil was chasing the Swede round the deck of the schooner yelling to beat all git-out. Just as I shouted, the Swede threw the capstan-bar, landing it on Feodor. It knocked him plumb overboard and broke his arm—though we didn't know this till later. Nicholas, my boy, the bloody creole sank like a ton of ore, and this chap—" the Colonel pointed with his cane to the smocked figure on the grass, "—this chap, who was leaning over the stern of the *Starr* taking in the rumpus, goes overboard in as pretty a dive as I ever did see! He got hold of Feodor and started to tow him ashore—the tide running out like a mill-race, too. I don't know how in hell it happened, Nick, but just before he landed him, that crazy half-breed ups with the bottle he still held, and hits the fellow on the jaw. Yes, sir. Knocked seven bells outten him!"

Unheeded by the indignant Colonel, the small steamer *Starr* was moving slowly away from the dock below. Overhead seagulls called and answered. From across the village came the faint barking of a dog, and the nearer phonographic rendering of a "mammy" song popular in the States, 2000 miles southeast. But

Colonel Jeff was oblivious of these familiar sounds. He lifted his cap and with the little finger of the same hand perplexedly scratched his gray head.

"And by the lord, here we are in a pretty kettle of fish," he growled. "That scoundrel Feodor laid up with a broken arm just in the busiest season on the fox-ranch, no help to be found for love nor whiskey on account of the herring run, and *me* not knowing the fu-fu valve from the ash-pan on that blasted launch of Sasha's."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it, Colonel Jeff." Nash lolled back in his chair and laughed again as if at the other's distress. "The Providence that looks out for drunken men and fools will provide. I got two extra men in from the West'ard today. Sasha knows I'm always glad to help her out—if she'll ask me. I—but cast an eye on your whiskered friend, Jeff. I think he's coming back to earth."

It was true. Even as the Colonel stepped toward him, the man on the grass stirred and opened his eyes. A moment later he was sitting up gingerly placing a slender, well-formed hand to his jaw.

"Jee-ru-sa-lem!" he mumbled in a distinctly American voice. "What a wallop!"

Pivoting his body at the waist, he looked about him as if in search of some one. "What became of that blamed fool?" he queried.

"He's all right, my boy! Feodor's all right!" assured the Colonel heartily, a deep relief in his voice. "How are *you,* sir? How are *you?* Permit me to assist you to your feet." The Colonel, when making an acquaintance, used his most polite phraseology.

"E-a-s-y . . . easy there, Chief!" The stranger,

still holding his jaw with one hand, waved the Colonel off with the other. "Not so fast . . . I feel as if I were fastened to the edge of a buzz-saw." He drew his knees up, and resting his elbows on them, sank his dark head in his hands. A battered wrist-watch, like those worn by officers during the war, caught the light as he moved.

Nicholas Nash sat up in his steamer-chair. His eyes, with their habitual look of somnolent disdain, passed deliberately over the stranger's smock and the foreign boots. For a moment it seemed as if he might speak of them. But he did not. He said instead:

"The *Starr* has pulled out without whistling, Colonel. Your friend here has missed his boat."

The newcomer raised his hairy face from his hands with a jerk.

"Good—*Lord!*" he ejaculated.

CHAPTER II

"GOOD LORD—*no!*" the man repeated, making an effort to get to his feet.

Colonel Jeff hastily thrust his pipe into his pocket, jabbed his cane into the earth, and stooped to lend his grunting assistance.

"Take it easy—easy, my boy. Just take it e-a-s-y," he entreated. "There!" He steadied the swaying figure with one hand, while with the other he carefully brushed some clinging grass from the stranger's damp clothing. *"Now,* what you need, my dear sir, is a wee drop of good liquor under your belt. Nothing like it to put a man on his feet. But—" he raised himself and laid hold of his cane again, "but—ar-r-umpp—" He hesitated, and cocked a meaning look over his glasses to meet Nash's eye. "All I can offer you is —a cup of hot coffee."

The Colonel brought out the last words with the martyred air of one who reluctantly observes the Eighteenth Amendment; for, until new arrivals proved themselves, no citizen of Rezanoff would admit that the village was anything but dry. "Yes, my boy," he went on apologetically, "I'm sorry to say that though we live in the grandest country on God's green foot-stool, spiritually speaking, honest-to-goodness liquor is as rare here as holy water in hell. But then," he added

with an airy wave of his cane, "there's nothing perfect in this world. The sun has its spots, the diamond its flaws, and the dog its fleas. Come, Nick! You're sitting there with as much animation as a sack of spuds. Take hold of this chap and we'll get him over to the hotel for a bit of lawful nourishment."

But the stranger did not seem in any further need of assistance. He filled his lungs with the tonic morning air, and, brushing the dark hair from his forehead, walked slowly over to the old cannon. He paused beside it, looking thoughtfully down on the dock below, where the *Starr* had so recently been moored.

"Well," he said at last, with an air of cheerful resignation, "she's gone, all right."

"She has, for a fact," came the Colonel's hearty agreement. "But never mind, my boy. There'll be another steamer along a month from now. And you'll find Alaska's not the worst place in the world to get stranded in," he continued, with a glance at the man's costume. "Looks to me as if you'd just got out of Siberia. They tell me that between the White Guards and the Bolsheviki over there, an American's a continual candidate for a front seat in Heaven."

As he ceased speaking both he and Nash looked expectant. When the man neither affirmed nor denied the statement, the Colonel went on:

"Oh, well, no matter where you're from, my boy, you've hit the right spot at last—the best country on God's green foot-stool, I repeat. By the way," Colonel Jeff leaned forward confidentially, "do you mind giving me a clue to the name you're using now?"

Something like a smile showed in the newcomer's gray eyes.

"Call me Tynan," he said. "Gary Tynan."

"And can you run a gas engine, Gary?"

"Absolutely!"

"Praise Heaven!" exclaimed the Colonel piously. "Now, I'm Jefferson Breeze, the best single-handed talker in the North, and the *only* sour-dough that knows nothing about a boat. And he—" with a wave of his hand toward the trader—"is Nicholas Nash—the High Mogul of Rezanoff."

Nash acknowledged the introduction carelessly. He shifted his long legs and rose from the chair, settling his cap forward over his light hair. There was a faint, indescribable look of danger about him as he thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers, and, with a shoulder-swinging gait, crossed over to the Colonel. He wore a suit of dark-green forestry cloth and leather puttees. His face was long and lean and of that ruddy hue that tells of freckles which fade after early boyhood. His eyes—it was difficult to tell whether Nick Nash's eyes were blue like those of his Irish father, or brown like those of his Russian mother, for though he was thirty years old, there was a vague, moist mistiness about them, such as is seen in the eyes of very young puppies, or in the eyes of natives who have drunk *macoola* many years.

People were divided in their opinion of Nicholas Nash. "Spawn of the Devil" some of them called him. Among those who used this term most frequently when young Nick was growing up, was his own father, Martin Nash, the owner and manager of the Rezanoff Trading Company. Motherless at the age of twelve, young Nick had been liberally supplied with money and kept in school in the States as much as possible.

His vacations spent at home were remembered with sighs by his father and the dusky creole mothers of the village. When he was twenty, he came back to Rezanoff and announced that he was through with institutions of learning. His greatest desire was to make money.

Still, he refused to work in the store, saying it was slow. He had brought back with him the fastest, best-equipped launch that ever cut the waters along the Aleutian Islands. In a land of reckless men he soon became notorious for his dare-devil exploits. Natives and white men alike talked of him from Prince William's Sound, with its hundred winding bays, to the end of the Aleutian chain stretching toward Asia across the shallow green of Bering Sea.

For half a dozen years the appearance of Nash's *Seal Pup* off any of the sleepy old Russian villages was a signal for the convivial ones to get out barrels of *macoola,* the viciously potent sourdough beer of the North. But—if it was summer—the dark village mothers gathered in their pretty creole daughters from outdoor tasks of berry-picking and hay-cutting on the hills, and put them to stirring bubbling pots of jam, or some other work that kept them in the copper-hung kitchens, where the maternal eye was never absent.

In those days honest old Martin Nash swore that when Death took him, his son should never inherit one cent. Rather would he leave the business of the trading-post to his friend, Father Anton, for the building and support of the orphanage the Russian priest was ever hoping to establish at Rezanoff.

But the war changed all that. Nick Nash's bitterest enemy could not, with truth, accuse him of lack of

courage. He was among the first to enlist in Alaska. After three years overseas with the 41st Engineers, he returned with a splendid record, and Martin Nash, for the first time, welcomed him home with tears of pride.

"He's a changed lad—a changed lad," he assured his cronies who gathered in the store of an evening. "He's that quiet—why, the fella actually comes to me, mind you, and takes the work of me bookkeeping off me hands—and me never astin' him at all!" he would invariably finish, looking about him with dim eyes alight with happiness.

The glamour of war dimmed, for a time, the memory of those other years. People wanted to like Nicholas Nash for his father's sake. "Nick? Oh, he was a bit wild," they'd say, "but the war took that all out of him. He'll settle down and make good, all right."

Old Martin had been dead a year now, and Nick was making good. He carried on the business of the Rezanoff Trading Company as well as his father had, though his helpers were all strangers to the village, men whom Nash had known in his restless days. He had even enlarged the scope of his territory. Since fox-farming was fast becoming the leading industry of the Aleutian Islands, he himself visited the various fur-farms to establish trading relations with the owners. He marketed nearly all the furs produced in that section, and fox-farmers as far east as Seward were beginning to depend on him for the best supplies, and often for hired help.

Nash made a specialty of fox-ranch supplies and his years of roving in the *Seal Pup* had given him a knowledge of the whole northwestern coast. As he stood

beside the Colonel now, his humid eyes missed no detail of the stranger's appearance, though his manner was casual.

Colonel Jeff proceeded, in his most orotund manner, to express his thanks and appreciation of the rescue of Feodor. "But you're feeling pretty skookum now, Gary, aren't you?" he finished. "Good! All right, then, I've got a little proposition to put up to you. Come along, boys, we'll toddle over to the hotel and see if Zoya can't give us a hot snack while I talk."

Without waiting for assent, he slipped a hand through the arm of each, and still talking, led them off down the flagged path, past a Russian sundial, to the roadway.

The only street tranquil old Rezanoff knows is the wide thoroughfare which leads up from the trading-post on the beach, and ambles its way through the village skirting half a mile of the crescent Harbor. Knoll-tops and hollows were dotted with small pink and white and yellow houses, all with window-boxes bright with flowers. Narrow silver paths made lines across the green downs and furnished sunny drowsing places for old dogs who slumbered on regardless of grazing cows and their tinkling bells. Clothes-lines on the tops of knolls waved banners in the morning breeze—faded reds, vivid blues and orange, a gay defiance to the flame of nasturtiums and the softer color of blue-bells, which painted the tiny yards fenced off with discarded herring-nets.

As the trio walked, they met pretty creole girls who smiled shyly while passing, with linked arms, toward the trading-post. Old, brown-faced women in trailing skirts and kerchiefs tied beneath their chins, plodded

stolidly along, now and again making a detour to avoid Aleut boys, half-buried under back-loads of wild hay. These jolly young harvesters came caroming along the road, laughing and exchanging quips with loquacious Colonel Jeff as they passed.

Sea-gulls, sailing on lazy wings, jeered down at some solemn ravens perched on the jade-colored roof of the old Russian Church. Quaint and Muscovian, the little house of God dominated the village from a semi-circle of alders. In the niches of the white belfry hung a chime of bells which had been cast in the foundries of Sitka when Baranoff ruled the North, and the Byzantine spire held aloft the glittering, three-barred cross of the Russians. But the shutters on the windows were closed, and three planks were fastened across the doorway. Behind the Church the old parish-house of squared logs was likewise shuttered and nailed up.

"Yes," trumpeted the Colonel, who had been pointing out these objects of interest with his cane, "yes, look at it—completely out of business. The war in Russia certainly played hob with the priests of the Greek-Russian Church, even here in Alaska. Since the disorganization over there, the poor devils don't get enough to bless themselves with, let alone keep up the work of the Church. Their followers here have never been trained, you know, to support it. The Czar attended to that—played the Little White Father stuff, and all that sort of thing. By the lord, I, for one, feel sorry for the priests. I do, for a fact!"

Nick's laugh, with its scornful undertone, interrupted the Colonel.

"Colonel Jeff, your heart's as soft as their hands!

Why shouldn't they get out and work like the rest of us, instead of psalm-singing all the time in front of a lot of Tin Peters?" Thus Nick disrespectfully designated the holy icons of his mother's Church.

"Well, they're doing it now, aren't they?" retorted the old man. "Yes, sir, every last one of 'em is at some kind of work—and they not knowing any more about manual labor than a baby, and everyone giving them the laugh, too, by the lord! They not only get out and hustle every day of the week, but in the evenings and on Sunday you'll find 'em attending to their Church doings—for not a darned cuss of 'em will give up his Church—no sir! Not one! And it costs real money to keep the candles burning and all that monkey business that makes religion pretty to the natives." Colonel Jeff turned aside to make room for an Aleut boy wheeling a huge barrow-load of salmon. "And there's the marrying and the burying and the sick that's everlastingly with us. Who goes good at the store, even now, for a native's grub, when he's got T.B. and can't work? Eh, Nick? Why, Father Anton of course, just as he always did. Though in the old days your dad was mighty good to the Aleuts himself, my boy," he added.

"Yes, and a pretty bit of money he lost by trusting the thieving beggars," commented the trader shortly.

"Well, the old days are gone," continued the Colonel, with the suspicion of a sigh. "When I was talking with Spider aboard the *Starr* this morning, he told me that Father Ivan, up at Karluk, cashed in the other day. The old fellow had a job as watchman on one of the fishtraps up there, Gary, and mighty dangerous work it is, too, climbing about on those high, spindling piles.

I know I couldn't do it, starve or no starve! Father held his job down fine last year, for all he was one of those gentle chaps who'd never been on anything higher than his own pulpit. But this year—well, I reckon he was pretty old for that kind of work, besides being crippled some with rheumatism. He fell off the trap last week and was drowned, poor devil. Luckily he was not a married priest, so he left no young ones behind.

"Now our Father Anton here at Rezanoff's a bit different. He's an up-and-coming little son-of-a-gun—I guess you thought so, Nick, ha! ha! ha! that time he nailed you stealing his sacramental wine when you was a kid, and beat the tar outten you!" The Colonel's hearty laugh rolled out as he hit the unresponsive Nash a mighty crack on the back. "Gosh! I'll never forget that day, Nick, ha! ha! ha! Nor how Sasha—but I'll have to tell you that story some other time, Gary. Here's the hotel."

The road took a turn and disclosed a long, hewed-log house built in the Russian style with a wide gable in the center. It looked like a comfortable frontier home, rather than a hostelry. The Colonel stepped carefully over a couple of dogs dreaming on the sun-warmed porch, and led the way into a large room which was lobby, lounge and dining-room combined.

Sunlight streamed through the many-paned windows, throwing upon the sand-scoured floor golden patches of light and the shadows of flowers that bloomed in pots on the deep sills. A wide couch ran along one side, its depressions and humps indicating long service. Three tables covered with white oil-cloth lined the other. On the wall above them was a large calendar

which performed its first duty of advertising a well-known rifle by means of a colored picture showing a man and a dog out hunting—both immaculately groomed. A small shelf near it contained half a dozen packages of assorted breakfast food, and some tins of condensed milk. The most striking object in the room was the icon which every Russian house knows. It occupied a shelf in the East corner—a beautifully hammered copper representation of the Saviour. Suspended by thin brass chains before it hung a *lampada*—a small brass holder for a half-burned but now unlighted candle.

"Ah-a-a! Here we are!" exclaimed the Colonel, hanging his cap and cane on the nail which held the calendar. He squeezed himself in at one of the tables, making room for Nick on the end. "Sit down, boys. . . . Anyone out there in the kitchen?" he called cheerily, looking over his glasses at the open door which led off from the room. "Oh, how are you, Zoya, my dear? You look pretty as a rice-lily this morning!"

In the doorway appeared a creole girl, tall, slender, round of limb. She leaned against the casing, looking in, smiling a crooked little smile that revealed a hint of white teeth. The crisp pink of her house-dress set off the clear olive of her skin and her cloud of dark hair parted in the middle and done in a simple knot at the back of her small head. Her eyes, dark and lustrous, were half-veiled by heavy lashes as her glance, passing swiftly over the Colonel and Gary lingered at last on Nick.

"Splice the coffee, Zoya, please, and bring us something piping hot—clam chowder would be about right," the Colonel went on as the girl approached. She stood

close to Nash, placing both hands on the table and leaning over as she waited for the order. "We have a new, though reluctant, addition to Rezanoff here. Mr. Gary Tynan. And you'll have to be mighty nice to him, Zoya, because it was he who pulled that obfuscated lummox of a brother of yours out of the bay this morning, after the Big Swede knocked him out."

Zoya murmured her appreciation of Gary's act, and then with more spirit, went on to tell that the stricken and repentant Feodor was even then upstairs in bed with his arm in a cast, undergoing a lecture from their mother. The girl's voice was pleasant, but had the slight heaviness and deliberation characteristic of the half-breed.

"Of course, my dear," announced the Colonel, "this accident cuts off your visit with your mother, you know. I came over to tell you that you'll have to go back to Rocking Moon with me this afternoon. With Feodor laid up, Sasha will need you more than ever."

Involuntarily the girl's eyes sought Nicholas Nash's face and she stood back from the table. "I—I—yes. I'll be ready to go this afternoon," she agreed quietly. "And I'll hurry the chowder, Colonel Jeff." As she moved toward the kitchen the eyes of all three men followed her graceful figure.

"Never mind bringing me anything, Zoya," Nash called after her. To the others he added, "I had a late breakfast."

After a few minutes of desultory talk, he rose nonchalantly from the table and sauntered into the kitchen, where all sounds of culinary activity ceased.

"Nick's got a natural bent for the ladies." The Colonel shook his head slowly as he brought his pipe

from his pocket again. "And where most of them are concerned he's got a code of morals like a rubber band. With Zoya, though, you understand, it's different, she being raised almost like a daughter in the house of Father Anton. Nick has his good points, and the war cured him of a lot of his deviltry, but, by the lord, the fellow still goes in for too much of his goo-goo work." The old man blew experimentally through the stem of his pipe.

"I tell him—and I'm telling you now, Gary, that it absolutely ain't right to monkey round with native women. It ain't fair to 'em, in the first place and no—well, they just don't seem to understand our ways. There's two things a *white* man in Alaska has no business with whatsoever. One's an Outside dog, and the other's an Inside woman. A dog from the States ain't worth his salt on a sled, and a native woman—" He paused to light the remainder of the cigar in the bowl of his pipe. "Well, to come to the point, young fellow, being as you're a cheechako, I'll just tell you about Pete Scidmore—Skysail Pete they called him down Seward way where he worked for me on a little prospect I had there once. You see, Skysail married an Indian woman there—a pretty little baggage she was, too—and then he goes away on a stampede and being sort of absent-minded like, he stays for four years. When he comes home, my boy, he finds a wireless station has been put up at Seward. Also that his wife has three little red-headed kids. Skysail ponders, looking at the kids and then at his wife. Then he says, dubious like: 'W-e-l-l, Annie, it's getting things down to a pretty fine point when you can have 'em by wireless!'" Colonel Jeff shot a fountain of smoke into

the air and slanted an eye kitchenward. "Chowder!" he bellowed. "Chowder!"

A moment later Zoya, flushed and glowing-eyed, appeared with a tray from which two bowls and a coffee pot sent up appetizing wreaths of steam. She deposited her burden and left the room again.

Colonel Jeff laid aside his pipe and addressed himself to his chowder, but allowed its consumption in no way to interfere with his monologue. "Now, when Father Anton is here—God bless him," he added heartily, "he keeps his whole blamed flock stampeding on the trail of virtue. No *macoola,* no philandering, but plenty parties, and marriage bells and dancing every week where he can drop in and see the Devil ain't hornin' in anywhere. I say he knows his business, even though I was raised a good Methodist, with my father a minister and seven kids, and the wolf always at the door. But Father Anton's been away a month now, and well—you saw Feodor today. That brings me to the point, Gary—" the Colonel stopped eating and emphasized his next remarks with baton-like motions of his spoon. "I'm in a hellauva mess. I'm representing Father Anton—oh, not in the Church!" he explained hastily, seeing the other's surprised look. "Only in a business, and you may say, a domestic way. I've got to get a man to run that blasted launch of Sasha's and help us out on the fox-ranch at Rocking Moon until Feodor is O. K. again. Just got to do it, man! Now, see here—" he leaned confidentially across the table, "—you can't possibly get away from here for a month, so what's the matter with your taking the job, eh?" He stabbed at his companion's chest with the spoon.

"I'm your man, Colonel," accepted Gary Tynan, with a promptness that suggested empty pockets. "Anyway, until a steamer comes along. But . . . Sasha, and Rocking Moon . . . Sounds interesting, only it's like so much Hindoo to me."

"Well, well, you surely must have come from the North Pole if you never heard about Sasha." The Colonel scraped the bottom of his bowl to get the last morsel, and then waved the dish back and forth, looking in the direction of the kitchen. "Chowder! A little more service here, Zoya, my dear!" he called. "Two more chowders!"

When these had been supplied, he leaned across to Gary again and continued, with the air of one imparting information of vast importance: "Sasha, my dear sir, is the girl who upset the traditions of the orthodox Greek-Russian Church. Sasha is Father Anton Larianoff's only offspring, and the owner and manager of the fox-ranch on Rocking Moon."

He allowed this statement to sink in before he went on: "Yes, sir, when the war came, and no more money came trickling in from Russia to keep things going here in the Church line, that little girl—I've known her ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper—that little girl sat right down to talk things over with her dad. Her mother's dead, you know. And, by the lord, in spite of all the arguments Father Anton could advance against it, and there were a-plenty, two years ago she ups and makes arrangements to start a fox-ranch on the Island of Rocking Moon, about fifteen miles from here. Last year, of course, she didn't have any stock to sell, as she started in with just a few pairs, but this fall she stands to clear up a bunch of

money and set her dad on his feet again, even to beginning that orphanage the old man's so crazy to build."

"But why, Colonel, is Father Anton himself so mysteriously absent at this time, and his church nailed up?" asked the young man. "If the Island is only fifteen miles away, I should think he could attend to the work of each place."

"That's just what I say," exclaimed Colonel Jeff. "He could, but Sasha won't let him. You see he's one of these enthusiastic little cusses, always trying to advance the cause of Alaska—he being Alaska born from the real old Russian stock, you know. Now, all his life he's been rooting round in Russian archives and books—English ones, too, for that matter, both in Alaska and San Francisco. And he's writing a history of this country from the year one. He thinks Alaska schools should have real Alaska histories and geographies for Alaska children, instead of using school books from the States that picture this whole country as a frozen waste inhabited by Eskimos and Polar bears. Sasha is just as crazy about the idea as he is, and when she found that three months' research work in the Territorial Library at Juneau would about finish the thing up, nothing would do her, but he must go down there before it came time for shipping foxes away this fall. When Father gets this history done, he thinks he'll get money enough from it so that Sasha can give up the ranch—but I'm not so sure about that. Between you and me I don't think she wants to give up the ranch. Anyway, that's how it is. Father is off down in Juneau now, and *we're* here, where we have no business being if we're going to get a load of salmon on this tide," he finished, looking at a black-faced

watch he drew from his shirt-pocket. "Shake a leg, my boy. Let's go!"

The two men shoved their chairs back from the table and rose, just as Nicholas Nash—his cap still on his head—sauntered in from the kitchen.

"Oh, I say, Nick," the Colonel hailed him. "You needn't bother about finding a man to substitute for Feodor. Everything's hunky-dory. Gary, here, is going to take the scoundrel's place."

Nick turned quickly toward Gary, a flicker of displeasure showing in his eyes.

"Know anything about foxes, Tynan?" he asked, with a hint of suspicion.

"Not a thing in the world," replied the stranger cheerfully, "except the story about the fox and the grapes."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Colonel. "My boy, if that old party, Esop, was writing that story now, it wouldn't get by. He'd have to make something else the matter with those grapes. In these days of Prohibition it makes 'em too darned suggestive. Um-umm! Sets me to slavering at the mouth just thinking of 'em!"

The trader ignored the interruption. "Well, Tynan," he invited casually, "drop in at the store any time you're in town, and let me know how you like your job as hired man." His long stride covered the distance to the open door where he stood looking down the road. "See you again, Tynan." He drew a package of cigarettes from his pocket. "So long, Jeff. Be careful you don't fall overboard." He lighted a cigarette and with an impatient movement of his foot, shifted one of the sleeping dogs aside as he crossed the porch.

Gary watched the tall figure disappear round a turn in the road.

"Sort of a queer, smoldering eye, our friend Nash has," he remarked as if to himself.

The answer on Colonel Jeff's lips was cut short by the entrance from the kitchen of Zoya. "Ah-a-a, here you are, my dear!" he said, drawing a worn wallet from his pocket to settle his bill. "We'll return for you in a couple of hours, so have your ditty-bag all ready. It'll be mighty good to have you back cooking for us at the ranch again, Zoya. Between Sasha and me both trying our hands at the job, my indigestion's about ruined." He turned to take his cane from the nail. "Come Gary. We'll stagger down to the store now and get you a few things, for of course the *Starr* went off with all your duds." He cast a speculative eye on the young man's beard. "An' I'll trim up that brush heap of yours with the scissors, too, while we're there," he added. "Otherwise, you ain't bad-looking."

Half an hour later, as the two men emerged from the door of the trading-post with their purchases under their arms, a low rakish, cabined launch shot out from the dock near by. It headed across the sparkling blue bay, throwing water high on each side of its prow. The loud, arrogant *put-put-put* of its unmuffled exhaust struck the green hillside back of Rezanoff like a tangible thing, the echo rebounding to smite the ears of the listeners. Before the two men had reached the dock where the *Simmie and Ann* lay, the intensity of the sound had diminished until it was but a hum on the air.

"That fellow can go some!" exclaimed Gary, with a man's admiration for speed.

"Yes. That's Nick in his *Seal Pup.* Swiftest thing this side of Seattle." The Colonel stood a moment looking out over the island-dotted bay where the launch was growing small in the distance. "He's going over to Rocking Moon to see Sasha, I reckon."

The old man's bemused eyes lingered on the disappearing craft. "Nick has always had everything he wanted in life, seems to me—except Sasha," he meditated as if he had forgotten the presence of his companion. "His father was one of my oldest friends . . . but—" He paused, then finished with sudden fierceness, "By *God,* I hope he never gets her!"

CHAPTER III

AS Colonel Jeff and his companion stood on the dock at Rezanoff watching the vanishing *Seal Pup,* Sasha Larianoff, fifteen miles away, lay in the grass just below the weathered planks of a watch-tower which crested the highest promontory on her Island of Rocking Moon. Beside her, Alexander Baranoff, her pet blue fox, sat on his haunches looking out over the sunny, silvered water of the straits.

The August sun blended the scents of earth, trampled grass and wild flowers about her. Through half-closed eyes she watched seagulls flying over, their breasts sleek and white, their heads turning alertly from side to side. Little wind gusts came blowing across the spruce groves back of her, spicing the air with a savor of forest and the freshness of the open sea. They brought her the drowsy murmur of surf from the outer beach of the Island, and rustled the purple panicles of wild hay that bowed daringly over the fringe of space beyond her feet.

After a morning of hard work it was good to lie against the warm, sweet earth. She stirred in lazy content and tilted her chin in a frank yawn as she stretched her lithe, young limbs luxuriously. Her outflung arm came in contact with the meditative Alexander, nearly knocking him over. He recovered his

balance and withdrew to the shade of a tall lupine, from whence he eyed her with reproachful dignity.

Sasha sat up laughing. "Oh, Alexander! 'scuse me, you comical, human little thing!" Her voice, bantering affectionate, had a low, faint huskiness that was singularly pleasing. "But really," she went on, shaking a finger at her offended pet, "*you* ought to be over on the other side of the Island helping your spouse take care of her puppies. . . . What's that you say? She's tired having you everlastingly under foot! . . . Oh-o-o! P-o-o-r Alexander! Nobody loves him at all? Come over to me, old honey, and I'll rub your funny head for you."

Her slim, outstretched hands invited him, but the fox blinked his yellow eyes, and running his tongue over thin, black lips, turned his head away as if in supreme disgust at the words she had put into his mouth. Then, suddenly changing his mind, he came toward her with deliberate, dainty steps, his great, plumy tail trailing through the grass. He settled himself with his muzzle on Sasha's lap, and closed his eyes as she began stroking his maltese-colored fur.

The sunlight heightened the clearness of the girl's creamy skin, the deep amber of her long-lashed eyes, and the undertone of gold in her dark, copper-colored hair. "Larianoff red" they called Sasha's hair over in Rezanoff where she had been born twenty-three years before. All the Larianoffs had it, from the time of the first young Anton Larianoff, a secular priest, who came from the land of the Tsar in the historic galiot *Simeon, the Friend of God, and Anna the Prophetess,* in the days when the naïve Russians leavened their fur-trading with piety.

It was Anton who rang the first church bell that called the savage Aleuts to worship in Russian America. It was he who established the first school for their children. Sasha bore the name of his Russian wife, and through her had inherited the Island of Rocking Moon. In the North everyone knows that the first-born son of a Larianoff becomes a priest, and the first-born daughter inherits the Island of Rocking Moon.

Ever since Sasha could remember she had heard stories of Anton, the Fighting Priest, and while she admired the zealous exploits of this sturdy, red-headed one who fought and loved and worked and died nearly a century and a half ago, she had always taken an unholy delight in the extremely pious and lengthy name that adorned his vessel. As a little girl, despite the shocked disapproval of old Seenia, her Aleut nurse, she had bestowed it on all her father's rowboats and bidarkas, joyously rolling the ponderous syllables on her irreverent young tongue. Today, the modern gasboat that enabled her to carry on the business of her fox-ranch bore the historic appellation, shortened affectionately to *Simmie and Ann.*

It was time for the *Simmie and Ann* to be heading home now from Rezanoff, where Colonel Jeff had gone for supplies. The girl hoped he would bring Zoya back with him. Ever since she could remember, Zoya and Feodor had been more her friends and companions than her servants, for in her father's house no one was called servant.

Her father's house! A pang of homesickness stirred in her heart for the substantial, homely comfort of the old hewed-log parish house at Rezanoff; for the happy,

hospitable years she had known there before the World War. Then Zoya's mother, who now kept the Rezanoff hotel, had been her father's housekeeper, and they never knew how many were to sit down to the table. Always there had been three extra covers laid in preparation, and always there were present the regular visitors, pensioners and orphans living with them.

And her father! Never was he so happy as when, in those days of plenty, he played host at the head of his long, candle-lighted table. Sasha's eyes grew fond as she envisaged him—a slender, rather small figure in clerical black; genial, humorous, kindly, but eagerly argumentative. How dear he was with his thick, white hair always ruffled on top of his head, his sapphire-blue eyes flashing above the white of his close-cropped beard, as they did when he made a point in a discussion! And with what an air he leaned back in his chair afterward, lifting to his lips the long, slender holder of Alaskan jade in which he smoked his single, daily cigarette! Sasha marveled that his hands, so slim, so sentient on the keys of a piano or the strings of a violin, could handle a spear or a gun with equal skill, or paddle a bidarka safely through the gale-lashed breakers of the North Pacific, as he was often obliged to do when he visited his outlying parishes.

Sasha mused on, absent-mindedly stroking Alexander's fur. She recalled her father's delight in the happiness of his dance-loving flock at Rezanoff. Never had his birthday gone by without all of them turning out to serenade him—guitars slung from their shoulders, voices raised in the old Slavonian melodies he loved so well. She wondered if he would get back from the South in time for his birthday festival this

year. Mentally she computed the weeks, counting them over on her fingers. Six weeks, if he were fortunate in finding in the Juneau library what he wanted to complete his book.

She wished it were her father she was waiting for today, instead of good-hearted, blundering Colonel Jeff, who was doing his best to look out for her. But perhaps the Colonel would have letters from her father. Although no mail-boat had come from the South, there was always a chance that the *Starr,* coming from the West'ard, might bring a strayed mail-sack.

"No more rubs, now, Alexander," she said at last, as she lifted the animal from her lap. "We'll see if Colonel Jeff is coming home yet."

She rose, shaking the clinging grasses from her narrow green frock while she climbed the few feet to the watch-tower.

About her the wild hay stood shoulder high, shimmering and swaying in the wind. A single larkspur tapped with purple fingers the broken pane of the tower window, which commanded a view of the waters north, east and west. No craft could approach unseen from any of those directions.

Sasha never failed to thrill to the incipient romance of the half-ruined old Lookout house. It was suggestive of those first wild and unsuccessful days of fox-farming in Alaska over half a century ago, when a San Francisco company had leased Rocking Moon from her grandmother and begun an industry hitherto unknown. Then it had been necessary, when the furs were prime, to post guards in the tower and keep a constant watch for the approach of Aleut hunters in their bidarkas—natives who slipped over from the other

islands hovering like chicks along the mother-coast of the Alaskan mainland.

The natives had no sense of stealing when they took the foxes. Before that time the whole country had been theirs for hunting, and every wild animal their legitimate kill. By the time the pioneer fox-ranchers had taught them to distinguish between "mine and thine," the poaching had effectively put an end to the first attempt to establish a fur-farm on the Island of Rocking Moon.

Sasha felt thankful that in these days of civilization poaching was unknown. She could not afford to lose a single fox this winter, with everything she and her father had at stake—everything, that is except the Mask of Jade. . . . But the Mask of Jade—where was it? Where could old Seenia have hidden it so carefully that neither she nor anyone else could find it—not even at the time, two years ago, when so much depended upon it?

For a moment the intensive expression in Sasha's eyes deepened as she pondered this question that was with her daily. Then, as usual, she dismissed it unanswered; and, leaning back against the old tower wall, she shaded her eyes to look toward Rezanoff.

A line of water-birds winging low over the straits was the only sign of life. The kelp beds that were the wonder of the old time voyagers, lay like masses of brown, shimmering ribbons hopelessly entangled along the rocky beach of Windward Island across the channel. Windward was one of the many low islands that interposed heavy spruce forests between her and the hidden village of Rezanoff lying at the foot of far, hazy, velvet-textured hills. Rimming the distance be-

hind them lifted a line of shadowy, lilac-toned mountains, marked with traces of volcanic ash from the last eruption of Mt. Katmai. They were gentle, sloping pyramids bathed today in colors so lovely that the very clouds deserted the blue of the zenith to hover above their snow-tipped peaks. Sasha watched the slow-moving, sun-shot masses of vapor billow in faint shades of silver and primrose and coral, from plum-colored depths. Clouds gave her a feeling of tremendous spaces, utter freedom; a delicious sense of detachment from all earthbound things. A sort of radiance welled up within her as she looked.

"Hello, God!" she said softly.

Ever since she could remember she had said that when she looked on some beautiful manifestation of nature. She said it, despite old Seenia's years of predicting that such awful familiarity with the Diety would bring a curse on the house of Larianoff. Sasha smiled a little now, remembering her old Aleut nurse's habit of hastily crossing herself while she darted fearful glances about. Dear, funny old Seenia! Not even her long residence with two generations of Larianoff priests could keep her from wearing a devil-charm about her withered neck—on the same string that held a tiny Christian cross! And she still spoke respectfully to the Volcano Oo-koon!

But Seenia, filled with native superstition, was yet at heart a romanticist, a chronicler of the loves and high adventures of the Larianoffs. Sasha had sat at her feet many an evening listening to the story of the first Anton who successfully competed with dashing Russian officers for the hand of a governor's daughter. And there was that delectable tale of her

grandfather when he was studying for the priesthood at the old monastery at Sitka. The girl never tired of hearing how the ardent young lover interrupted his studies long enough to elope with the daughter of a dissenting sea captain. Those two had not merely outwitted the captain, but had confiscated the irate parent's schooner and sailed away in it to the nearest village to be married! Ah, thought Sasha, how wonderfully men and women loved in those days! How good to have lived in those romantic times! Nothing like that happened now. Still, sometimes, when she stood alone on Lookout Point in the evening, watching the radiance of the sunset, she caught herself waiting. . . . It seemed, because of the sheer, unspeakable beauty of the world, a lover must come to her out of the veiled amethystine mysteries of those western hills. . . .

Gradually, through her dreaming, she became aware that the quiet of the afternoon had been broken. Then, like a rude, arrogant voice echoing against the cliffs of Rocking Moon, came the loud, staccato *put-put-put* of a gas engine. Across the channel a launch swiftly rounded the point of Windward Island. She watched its approach.

"The *Seal Pup,* Alexander," she said to her pet. "We might have known that only Nicolai would arrive with such speed—and commotion, mightn't we?"

She made no effort to go down to the house. Let Seenia tell him where she was. She liked Nicolai best with a setting of mountains and the sea, anyway. Ever since his return from France she had felt a vague uneasiness when he came close to her indoors—Nicolai, whom she had known ever since she could remember.

She sat down amid the grasses, the patient little

Alexander taking his place at her side. She could hear the launch coming nearer. Its echoing *put-put-put* marked its progress along the cliffs below her and into the little bay as definitely as if she were watching it.

Now, she thought, Nick was tying the *Seal Pup* to the float before the ranch-house. Now he was striding impatiently up the strip of beach that led to the path through the rice grass. With the eyes of her mind she saw him pause before the wide veranda where old Seenia sat drowsing. Perhaps he had a package for her—music or candy. A question, and he was away again, tramping across the meadow with its patches of blooming fire-weed; skirting the lily-pond that reflected the edge of the forest; climbing the hillside at her back, ruthlessly stamping down the blue-bells and snatching off the heads of the Indian celery. That was Nicolai—ruthless, inexorable when he wanted anything, or when he was going anywhere—even to see her. Nicolai who had as many moods as a woman. What would he be today, she wondered—the charming, irresponsible Irishman, or the moody and savage Russian?

At her side Alexander moved uneasily, rose and turned his muzzle to the wind. A time or two he raised it high in an exploratory sniff, then abruptly trotted off into the grass, just as footsteps sounded behind her.

"Why, Sasha!" Nick's voice carried a distinct tone of resentment. "Didn't you see me coming down the strait?"

"Didn't I see him coming down the strait!" Sasha repeated banteringly. "Yes, Nicolai, I did. And what's more I heard you, too, not being stone deaf."

She looked up over her shoulder into his face, and met the sullen expression of his agate eyes with a laugh. "Just look at his offended Majesty!" she went on, playfully addressing the bowing larkspur. "I do believe he expected me to dash down the hill and catch his line as he came sweeping in to the float!" With her arms she pantomimed the arrival of the *Seal Pup,* and the casting of the line.

"Sasha!" The word was snapped out like a command. "There you go, always laughing at me—ridiculing me—keeping me away from you with your mockeries and your devilish—" An impatient movement of his clenched hand finished the sentence. "Every time I come near you, lately, you say something to set me off wrong! You never used to be this way, Sasha," he finished irritably.

The girl did not answer at once. A puff of wind set all the seed-pods on the lupines clicking like fairy castanets; set all the blue-bells ringing on their thread-like stems. But she banished her impulse to call Nick's attention to them. Nick's ears never had been attuned to fairy music. He always laughed at what he called her childish notions, just as he always failed to play up to her bantering. Perhaps it was because he had lived for a time in the States, that far-away country of civilization which she had never seen. Even her father, who had often been to San Francisco, told her people were different in the States.

"Nicolai," she said, presently, in the same tone she had used to pacify the offended Alexander an hour and a half before. "Nicolai, your serious ways crash down on my spirit like a boulder from the crater of Oo-koon! Surely, now, you know I was just trying

to have a little jest with you. . . . Come, Cross-patch. . . . Come sit beside me here where we can look toward Rezanoff and——"

"I'm tired looking at Rezanoff, Sasha!" Nick interrupted her with rudeness that was apparently unconscious. A peculiar, a smoldering look crept into his eyes, a look the girl knew portended one of his restless, "devil" moods. "I tell you I'm sick of the whole country! For Heaven's sake, let's turn our backs on Alaska and look toward the South—toward civilization—for once." He thrust his hands out to assist her with an air that brooked no refusal.

She caught them and came lightly to her feet. "All right, old bear!" she agreed cheerfully.

A few moments later they were seated on the other side of the watch-tower, their backs to its weather-worn planks. Nick's moody eyes traveled over the scene below them.

"God!" he exclaimed. "Look at it, Sasha! . . . I should think you'd go mad here." He threw out his hand. "The loneliness—the cursed *peace* of it all!"

Sasha's eyes followed his. Below them the hillside was a-stir with waving grasses, bee-haunted celery blooms, golden-rod and blue geraniums. Eastward the riot of color fell away to a small horseshoe bay ringed with clean, gray sand. In the shallows below she could see the bottom of flour-like volcanic ash glimmering through the green water. The *Seal-Pup* reflected its white, graceful length at the float. Back from the edge of the beach the red roof of the wide old ranch-house was rivaling the bright color of the fireweed which splashed the meadow; and a forest of tapering spruce trees, heavy with cones, marched down

to meet the wire meshes of the fox-corrals back of the log barn.

To the Alaskan girl it was home—home beautiful in the way of the wilderness; comfortable, too, and far from lonely. Were there not the gulls always calling overhead, the magpies and the blackbirds rollicking in the spruce tops, and one or more of her pure-bred blue foxes tiptoeing along the sands—her furry beauties that had no equals on the coast of Alaska? But then, Nicolai never had approved of her running the fox-ranch. He believed that women should be dependent on men in every way.

"The South!" Nick was repeating. "Oh, Sasha, if you could see it once—that country down there!" His voice thrilled to memory and his hand swept out across the green forest below, across the whole Island of Rocking Moon to the far line of purple sea showing on the other side. "If you could see it! The great, rich cities, with their high buildings, and miles and miles of chimneys sending up smoke to the sky. The luxuries! The conveniences! . . . God! I've been away from it all a year this time, and I'm hungry for it again—the city at night with the lights, the music, the perfume. . . . And the women—wonderful, subtle women, Sasha, with tinted faces and smooth, soft shoulders showing through the half-veiling, gauzy things they wear. And there's the dancing, and the—but oh! what's the use of talking to you, Sasha," he broke off, as if he despaired of conveying to her his ideas. "*You* have never even seen an automobile!"

There was a touch of intolerance in his voice. He drew a package of cigarettes from his coat pocket and selecting one, tapped the end of it impatiently against

his hand. Sasha, listening, her arms clasped about her drawn-up knees, could feel no remoteness from that world she had never known. At Nick's last words, with their implication of pitying impatience, her heart suddenly flamed with a feeling of defensive loyalty for the land of her birth. Abruptly she shot her feet out in front of her and turned to look at him, frowning under the tangle of her wind-blown hair. Her dark amber eyes were bright with resentment and the pink in her cheeks deeper.

"Auto-mo-beel!" She rolled the word scornfully on her tongue, unconsciously adopting her father's pronunciation of it. "Why is it that I should know the auto-mo-beel?" She lifted her firm little chin indignantly. "You forget, Nicolai, that I have seen it all in the moving pictures! I have seen your cities of stone and brick, with no place to breathe in the narrow gray cañons of streets, and the unfortunate inhabitants swarming through them—hurrying, jostling, yes, *leaping* aside to avoid collision with those auto-mo-beels that are darting about, crazy, like bugs! Auto-mo-beel!" she made a deliciously rude face. "Pooph!" And with a quick, outward flirt of both hands she added to her expressed opinion.

Nick paused in the act of striking a match and snatched the unlighted cigarette from his lips.

"Yes, yes," he returned in surprising agreement. "*That's* just it, Sasha, for those down there who must work for little money—and walk. But for the rich—the ones who ride—Ah, Sasha, you have no idea of the power money brings! You have no idea of the world of pleasure it opens up! Money! Power!" He brought his fist down on his knee. "I've tasted it down

there in the States! I've spent my money like a millionaire—while it lasted. I've had the jackals of traffic and trade slinking at my heels, fawning on me, giving me of their best. But I knew, damn 'em, that I was a king *only as long as my money lasted.* And always before I went broke, I had sense enough to come back here, back to Alaska to make more. . . . But it's getting harder every year to get it. The natives are bringing in fewer furs; the government is tying everything up. God!" he burst out passionately. "I wish I had lived in the old sea-otter days, when there was no cursed law in the land!"

The girl plucked a long spike of lupine and tapped the purple flowers against the palm of her hand. She was used to Nick's outbursts. He was always in rebellion against something.

"Yes, Nicolai," she nodded. "I've no doubt but that you'd have been one of the wildest of the sea-otter hunters, herding your poor Aleuts like a slave-driver." Her eyes began to twinkle. "But I'm sure downright piracy would have suited you better, Nick. Captain Kidd, for instance, did a fine business outside the law, you know." She smiled now, her short-lived resentment giving place to some picture of her imagination. "Oh, yes, Nicolai! I can see you swashbuckling along the deck of the *Adventure* in high boots and a clanking cutlass—see, like this—" She thrust out her chest, brandished the lupine, and with indrawn chin and protruding lips sang in a deep, artificial voice:

My name was Captain Kidd, as I sailed, as I sailed!
"And so wickedly I did, as I sailed!"

She waited a moment to see if Nick would smile. But he did not look at her at all. He lighted his cigarette and threw the match away.

"Oh, very well, sir. We'll be serious if you insist. . . . Anyway, I'm glad we live in a law-abiding community, even if traveled young men like yourself won't admit we're civilized."

The trader turned to her. "But don't you see, Sasha, we're neither one thing nor the other here in Rezanoff. Law is all right down in the States—but there ought to be some place in the world where a man can go and be himself—be free. When I'm in the States I want every comfort and luxury money can buy, and I'm willing to abide by the restrictions. But when I'm in Alaska where I can get none of those things, I want no restrictions. That's what makes me so restless here now—" he jerked his cap off his head and shook the light hair from his brow— "I'm tied to the trading-post since Dad is gone—tied to it and making just a little more than an ordinary salary. If I were getting money enough I wouldn't mind it for a few months in the year. I could always go to the States and have my fling then. . . . But—But—" He hesitated. "You see, Sasha, my ideas have changed a lot since the war. I never felt the need of money until now—a lot of money I mean. And I've decided to make it—or throw up everything and head for Siberia, or some place where there's freedom. I've *got* to make money. I'm going to make a pile of it next year—every year. Enough to live where I please,—anyway, eight months in the year. And Sasha . . . Sasha . . ." His voice softened as he leaned toward her, his

enigmatic eyes seeking hers. "When I go—I want you with me."

The girl held up her hand quickly as if for silence, but he went on unheeding.

"Yes, I'm going to marry you and take you down to the States to see what the Outside is like. And I'm going to dress you better than any of them, Sasha, you little devil!" His gaze traveled appraisingly from the girl's curl-crowned head to her small feet. "You pretty little red-headed devil!" He laughed as if in sudden appreciation. "By George, there are none of them that can compare with you down there, Sasha—even as you are now. . . . Come, sweetheart! Come, *lubimaya!* Don't look at me like that— You know you like me, Sasha." He slid his hand out with the instinctive arrogance of one used to submission. It closed over hers in a grip that hurt her. "Let's——"

With a sudden spring the girl was on her feet facing him. But she matter-of-factly shook her green skirts to dislodge the clinging grass, and with her lips pursed, began gingerly to rub the red spot on her hand. Only recently Nick had begun this talk of marriage. It troubled her, but with a desire to preserve their old-time friendliness, she refused to take him seriously.

"Blessed Peter!" she exclaimed with mild impatience. "How many times must I tell you, Nick, that I will not be courted in that love-me-or-I'll-beat-you-to-death fashion? How often must I repeat that I am never going to marry you, foolish boy?"

A silence that was somehow ominous answered her. She raised her face, for her companion was standing now. He was looking down on her. The wind blew his hair back from his lean face. His mouth was

pressed into a straight, lipless line that hinted of cruelty, and his eyes were smoldering as she had sometimes seen the autumn sun smolder behind the fog banks. For the first time she tried to read his eyes—those indecipherable eyes that were neither blue nor brown. Fear of something unknown, transient but chilling, touched her.

"Look here, Sasha! You really mean that, do you?" His voice had taken on a rough intensity, and a muscle at the flange of his nose twitched spasmodically.

"Yes . . . Oh, don't take it that way, Nick!" she cried, her heart stirred with sudden sympathy. "I'm fond of you—just as I've always been—but not that way. . . . Don't be like this any more, Nicolai!" She started forward, her hands held out impulsively. "Please . . . P-l-e-a-s-e be just brotherly to me as you used to be before you went to France!" she pleaded, her faintly husky voice tremulous with the memory of those other happier years when she alone, of all Rezanoff, could make wild Nick Nash listen to reason.

But the trader's expression did not change. He neither moved nor spoke.

"Nicolai?" she said, coaxingly.

She took another step forward and stood looking up into his sullen face with the playful, friendly smile they both had known. "Nicolai. . . ." The *boy* Nick had always given in when she coaxed him thus—had always said, a little abashed, "Oh, well—All right, Sasha, if you want it so." But the *man*——

Without warning he snatched her against his coat. She heard his heart beating and felt his hot face roughly, eagerly seeking her own.

From startled amazement her mood changed swiftly

to the frantic, caged feeling of one imprisoned and, in some way, profaned by the imprisonment. She was filled with panic and a furious momentary strength. She kicked gamin-like, and struck out with her fists, wrenched herself sideways under his arm, and before he could renew his hold, had squirmed from beneath his elbow. With both hands she pushed him from her and darted away, putting the length of the tower-house between them. Then she faced him, a panting, dishevelled little figure, her bright hair tumbling about her shoulders, the back of her hand pressed against her quivering mouth, hot tears threatening to overflow on her cheeks.

She tried to make herself realize that it was Nick who stood there—Nick who used to haul her to the trading-post on his sled to buy candy; Nick whom she had always regarded as an older brother. But the bulk of him swam in her tear-dimmed gaze, huge, unfamiliar, repellent.

With an emotion strangely compounded of sadness, indignation and farewell, she turned from him, and, stifling a sob, ran blindly down the hill.

CHAPTER IV

INSTEAD of taking the meadow-path that led directly to the ranch-house, Sasha turned out toward the beach. Her chaotic emotions of a few moments back had, by their very intensity, left her bewildered and strangely void of feeling. She knew only that she could not bear to see Nicolai again that day. She wanted to get away from him as far as possible.

She brushed swiftly through the tall grass at the foot of the hill, making a detour to avoid a lone spruce tree that spread cone-laden branches over a circle of wild roses. As she sped by, she was aware that Alexander, the fox, had glided out from the thicket and was trotting like a dog at her heels. A few moments later her sandals touched the hard, clean beach, and instinctively the girl fell into the trail walk of the North—the swinging, rhythmic gait that covers the ground almost without conscious effort.

To her left she passed the float where the *Seal Pup* lay, while on her right the roofs of the ranch-houses made red peaks above tall grass bordering the high-tide line. The smell of the sea came up damp and keen from the mark of the receding tide. Long, slim shadows of the girl and the fox moved smoothly before her on the sand, pointing eastward toward Lampadny Point a mile away.

Her little home bay lay between Lampadny and

Lookout Points, but the former was the only Point on the Island which was not a boulder-covered beach backed by beetling crags of talus-walled cliffs. Here the timbered hills of Rocking Moon sloped gently down until the forest fringed out at the edge of sand dunes where single trees, few and far between, stood out in blue, tapering beauty. But the dunes, thick with rice-grass, lupine and wild peas, rolled on in green and lavender softness until they diminished in a long sand spit. This curved about the bay like a protecting arm.

Sasha, arrived at the Point, turned into the swaying, waist-high tangle, and made her way across it to the seaward side of the Island. The wind was in her face.

She loved that moment of exquisite freedom that came to her when she emerged at the edge of the beach-drift and looked away over the silvered purple of the North Pacific, where no land lay between her and the horizon. Today, despite the disturbing events of the afternoon, she sprang, as usual, to a drift-log and stood a moment with lifted chin and outspread arms while the light wind fluttered her garments about her. It was a playful summer wind that chased big, deliberate, purple rollers in from the open sea, until, unable longer to withstand the teasing, they broke in spraying emerald and silver on the beach of Rocking Moon.

Sasha always sought the sea when she was troubled. There was something in its immensity, its permanency, that soothed and comforted her as religion comforts some women. She felt its calming influence now as she stepped down off the log and turned toward her goal fifty feet to the left.

There, topping a sand dune, a log tomb held aloft its six-foot Greek cross against the summer sky. Above the shimmering rice-grass, the timbers of the flat roof showed ivory-white, marking the grave of Father Paul, a Russian missionary of the old days, who was beloved by the whole Aleut nation for his deeds of kindness and sacrifice. Nearly a century has passed since his body was laid away and the little log house built above his resting-place; yet the spot is still held sacred, and many a tale of averted shipwreck the brown fishermen of Rezanoff tell—fishermen who in time of sea-peril, look toward Lampadny Point and send up a prayer for safety, just as their fathers did.

Sasha climbed the low wall; and, with a movement of content, seated herself with her back against the upright of the cross. She felt a sense of protection beneath the widespreading arms. Above her, in the intersection facing the sea, was a box-like receptacle with a glass door. It held the lamp, which, in accordance with the old custom of her people, was always lighted on the name-day of Father Paul. Each year this anniversary was the occasion of a pilgrimage from Rezanoff to Lampadny Point, where a vesper service was held in loving memory of the old monk. Sasha's mind, seeking the comfort and assurance of some dear, familiar thing, went back to the first pilgrimages she could remember, in the days before launches and steamboats were common in the North. Rocking Moon had been a lonely shrine then, uninhabited.

She recalled her father on the morning of the holiday, happy, energetic, setting forth from Rezanoff at the head of a flotilla of rowboats and bidarkas, over the fifteen miles of sun-jeweled sea that lay between

the village and Lampadny Point. She saw herself, very little, clasped in the circle of old Seenia's arm, sitting in the stern of her father's boat, on the vermilion chest that held his vestments. She heard the singing of the Aleuts as they paddled in a double row behind—the wild, chorded sweetness of native voices that floated out over the water, her father's tenor soaring above all in the chanting of the psalms.

"Let the heavens rejoice,
And let the earth be glad;
Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof!

Let the field be joyful,
And all that is therein;
Then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice!"

In those days she thought this had been written about her country. It was Alaska in summer. The remembered harmony had power to stir her yet with its beauty —a beauty to which still clung the intangible, fairy-like magic of melodies heard in childhood.

Then, swiftly and unbidden, flashed another mental picture—that of a tall, light-haired boy who stood recklessly in the bow of the boat directly behind her father; a boy who stood with his thin, young chin lifted and sang, as her father often said, in the tones of an angel, while he plotted some deed of the devil. Nicolai's boyish voice had been at once the despair and the delight of the music-loving Father Anton.

Sasha shook her head to dismiss the picture. She did not want to think of Nicolai. She rested her bronzed curls against the log cross and allowed her

fancy to dwell on the landing of the flotilla on the other side of Lampadny Point, from which she had just come.

There had been the boats drawn up on the sand, the happy calling and running about, the camp-fires glowing under the trees. Almost she could smell the pungent beach-wood smoke that drifted blue in the spruce branches, as the picnicking pilgrims prepared their afternoon meal. Some of them brought samovars and served tea, as at home. Nick's Russian mother had been one of those. Zoya's mother, then housekeeper for Father Anton, did so, too, while Sasha and the other children played below in the sand.

The old monk's name-day came in the summer season of the long, light nights. After the picnic dinner, the peace of the early evening enfolded sea and land with amethyst mists, and dusts of malachite and rose. It was then that Seenia slipped away to light the *lampada* on the cross of Father Paul. Afterward, the little girl Sasha had always taken her place with delight in that long procession of pilgrims that formed on the beach of Rocking Moon. Even now Sasha's heart thrilled faintly remembering her father, splendid in his vestments of scarlet and gold, attended by his acolytes holding aloft the silver banners and the gilded cross. The grass lay crushed and sweet where he led his people across the Point to gather about the tomb for vespers.

The cool air of those bygone evenings had been pungent with incense from the swinging censers, piquant with the tang of the tide. The plaint of low-flying sea-birds keened through the chanting of the choir. The gold on her father's robes turned crimson

in the glow of the sunset as he stood below the cross holding out his hands in benediction above the kneeling figures on the sand.

Something in this outdoor ceremony, with its mingling of orthodox pomp and Arcadian simplicity, appealed strongly to Sasha. God seemed very near then, very simple, very beautiful. Not the God who was worshipped in her father's gilded church at Rezanoff, but her own God of the sea and the land and the sweeping winds. Sometimes she wondered if she were not a bit like old Seenia with her cross and her devil-charm and her respect for Oo-koon.

At the thought she looked up toward the East where the purple, tapering volcano of Oo-koon rose from its island foundation. Thirty miles across the water it reared its dim cone five thousand feet above the swells which sucked in and out the caves, honeycombing its base. A steamy jet of vapor curled lazily from its summit, as Sasha had seen it on clear days ever since she could remember. But Seenia, who was ninety years old, could tell of a time when the slumbering Oo-koon awoke and its crater vomited columns of flame and clouds of ashes. The melting snow on its sides descended in terrific torrents, sweeping away the native village at its feet. Seenia could tell of a time even before that, when the great Cave of Oo-koon was the scene of barbaric ceremonies, and Aleut maidens, in masks to their shoulders, danced naked beneath the swinging mummies suspended from the vault of the cavern. Those mysteries had all been banished by the priests, the masks burned and broken. That is, all except the precious, eyeless Mask of Jade.

The Mask of Jade! As the moments went by,

Sasha's thoughts became busy with the mystery of its disappearance. But she was no nearer to solving it when Alexander thrust his weird little face out from the rice-grass below, and sprang to the top of the tomb.

When she turned to make room for him beside her, her attention was drawn to some marks which dotted the upright of the cross just under the *lampada*. They were three nearly obliterated depressions with splintered edges—bullet holes. She recalled well the day they had been made by the boy Nicolai, who had used the cross as a target one evening to try a new gun, just before the pilgrims embarked for home. It was for this reason she had never told him her great secret about the tomb—the secret Seenia had confided to her childish ears; the secret of the hinged log that swung in and afforded an opening to the tomb. Nicolai! Everything seemed to lead back to him today. She pressed her fingers in the depressions and slowly shook her head. Nicolai held nothing sacred. She knew it now; not even their friendship of a lifetime.

It came over her with a pang of sadness, a sense of loss, that today ended that laughing, teasing comradeship which had always existed between her and Nick Nash. She did not know why, but she felt the same emotion she had experienced when she—a wide-eyed little girl—had watched him use the old monk's cross for a target.

This was a negative sensation, however, compared with the sudden tyranny of feeling that seized her when Nicolai's face flashed before her—the face of the new and repellent Nick who had snatched her to him that afternoon on the Lookout. And he called that love!

She did not want love from him. She wanted him always as she had known him before he went to France.

Sasha dreamed of love as something powerful, yet delicate; something strong yet tender. She expected it to come to her some day, romantically and beautifully as it had to all her people. But if love brought that look to men's faces— She shivered again at the recollection, and threw an impulsive arm about Alexander's soft neck, hiding her forehead against his fur.

Then, with a queer, disturbing touch, there came for the first time a realization of her obligation to Nicholas Nash, the trader. It was the Nash money that had paid for Alexander, for the *Simmie and Ann,* for the very dress upon her back, for the food she had eaten for a year. True, it was old Martin Nash who had advanced nearly all the money with which Sasha began her fox-ranching. It was Nicolai's father, who, protesting vigorously in his Irish brogue, had finally taken as security a mortgage on Rocking Moon and everything the Larianoffs owned. Gladly would the old man have made the loan without security, but the Larianoff pride had insisted otherwise. The combined possessions of Sasha and her father seemed little enough to offer as security in a country where a man may have as much land as he needs for the staking. But Martin Nash—her father's best friend—was dead, and it was to Nicolai they owed the money now. Before this she had felt no uneasiness about it, no weight of obligation. Now, because of Nicolai's behavior that afternoon, she longed intensely to free herself from the debt at once. Yet this was not possible. She must wait until December when she sold

her foxes. There was no need to worry about paying the full amount then, for success had attended her efforts, and Rocking Moon vixens were already noted for producing the largest litters of pups on the coast. Rocking Moon Blues were in demand.

Disturbing this mood of self-confidence came memories of the failures of other fur farms in the vicinity. A fluttering feeling of impotence seized her for a moment as she considered her own possible failure. Then she hugged the passive Alexander tightly against her and spoke aloud to reassure herself.

"No, no, Alexander. That never can happen to us!" Swiftly she computed: there would be sixty foxes ready for shipment in December—thirty pairs of the finest Blues on the coast of Alaska. And she would get $350 a pair for them. "So you see we can't fail. . . ." Alex nuzzled his cold little nose against her neck. "We *can't* fail, honey."

Nevertheless, the thought of disease, accident, crept insidiously into her mind, drawing in its wake a train of appalling possibilities. She, a priest's daughter, had upset all precedent by engaging in business where no woman did such things. Against her father's advice, and the advice of all her friends, she had staked everything they owned on this fox venture—after she discovered that the Mask of Jade was gone.

The Mask! She looked out across the water to Oo-koon, milky-rose now in the late afternoon sun. It was over there in the great Cave beneath that tapering cone that her ancestor, the first Anton, had come into possession of the eyeless Mask of Jade, that famous relic of a heathen time which had come down through generations of Larianoffs; that last weird

symbol of barbarism which collectors from the largest museums in the world had tried in vain to buy from her father during those comfortable days before the war. Later—how well she remembered—when he would have parted with it for enough to finance for her the Rocking Moon Ranch—it was gone.

Seenia, for sixty-five years its guardian, could not tell whether it had been stolen or whether she herself had hidden it in some new place and forgotten. Seenia had lapses of memory now—the mark of her great age. Sasha knew the old Aleut was living on only in the hope that some day she might remember. Sasha encouraged her to talk of it each day, hoping, too, that the subconscious might give up its secret.

Four years ago a collector from a New York museum, more eager than the rest, had left in the bank at Seward a deposit of $8,000, together with a photograph and a detailed description of the relic. The money was to be delivered only to Father Anton or to Sasha any time within five years, if they brought the Mask of Jade. The time limit expired in December, little over four months distant. But Sasha was not troubled about this, for she had long ceased depending on the Mask of Jade to revive the family fortunes.

Busy with her thoughts though she was, the girl had not forgotten to listen for the sound of Nicolai's departing launch. She had not heard it, but the outgoing tide gave evidence that she must have been at the tomb an hour. Off the beach below her, boulders were thrusting their weed-crowned heads through the breakers, and already three sinuously stepping foxes explored for sea-food in the windrows of grasses left on the sand by the tide.

The girl watched their approach. Familiarity had never dimmed that feeling of awe and delight with which she regarded them. Even in the sunlight their maltese-colored fur made them shadowy, graceful wraiths of the wild. Now they stopped to raise pointed muzzles, sniffing the air for possible danger. Now they poked their noses among the bits of seaweed; now, as if in time to some inaudible rhythm, they trotted swiftly along the sand, their heavy tails carried low and to one side.

When Sasha saw them moving thus she knew why a certain dance-step which Nicolai had taught her, was called a fox-trot down there in the big United States she had never seen. Nicolai knew all the dances of civilization, just as he knew those of the North. Often, when in one of his boyish "devil" moods, he had danced for her and Zoya, to the music of rattles made of the crimson, clattering beaks of sea-parrots; danced the Whaler's Incantation and the Shaman's Dance. When he stepped those heathen figures there was about him a superlative savagery at once dangerous and alluring. She liked him then better than at any other time. She, a daughter of a long line of priests, found some buried instinct within herself rising and responding. She had even composed and played for him on the piano a muted, booming bass accompaniment to the castanets.

But as the years went by, Nicolai ceased to dance the old Aleut figures, at least where she could see him. She knew, however, that on his *macoola* parties to the Westward he did. When with her, he wanted to dance only those steps he brought back from the States—the dances of civilization. For years now he had ex-

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pressed a contempt for all things Alaskan. He was fond of telling Sasha that she was "provincial." While she admitted there was a certain fascination in the matter-of-fact way in which Nick mentioned the customs of New York, San Francisco, and, after the war, Paris and London, she fiercely resented his attitude toward the land of his birth. It cheapened him in her eyes. Sometimes she thought she might have cared for Nicolai as he wished her to, if he had remained loyal to his own country.

She raised her head now as her ears caught the sound of the *Seal Pup's* exhaust assaulting the cliffs below the Lookout. Nicolai had waited long for her to come back, she thought. She gave Alexander's head a pat and came to her feet.

Her eyes were even with the glassed-in box which held the lamp of Father Paul. A small blackened wick lay dry on the bottom of a deep bowl of heavy opaque glass. The oil had burned away, for it had been over a month since the last vespers at the tomb. Zoya now performed the ceremony of lighting the lamp at vespers, for Seenia had given up this duty nearly five years ago.

Sasha opened the little glass door and turned the bowl upside down to keep out the drifting sand. Sometimes fishermen, grateful for a big haul, landed to refill the bowl with oil and set it burning.

The girl stood a moment longer looking out across the sea. Though the sun was still high there was in the air that indefinable freshness that tells of evening coming on. Between her and the ethereal wedge of Oo-koon a flock of sand-pipers curved and swerved with thin, eerie cries. The blue of the zenith melted

into opal and pale amber out on the horizon, and the wind was dying away on the receding tide.

"Come on, Alexander. We're going home, little man," she said, stepping to the edge of the tomb. She jumped lightly to the sand and the fox leaped after her. Her thoughts were still busy with the events of the afternoon as she retraced her steps across the Point toward the ranch-house.

On the other side the little home bay lay smooth as a mirror. Ravens and magpies played in the rock weed left bare by the tide, and half a dozen foxes scampered along the edge of the drift, already anticipating feeding time. Just as she was nearing the float her own launch, the *Simmie and Ann,* rounded into view from the west.

Sasha quickened her pace and ran out on the float to wait for it. She could see Colonel Jeff and Zoya seated placidly, as usual, on boxes of supplies on the stern deck. Knowing how helpless the Colonel was in matters pertaining to the launch, she made ready to catch the line when Feodor should dart from the wheel and throw it to her.

But could that be Feodor she saw dimly in the shadow of the pilot-house? She tensed the muscles about her eyes as she looked again. No, decidedly it was not. A strange man, with a short, dark beard, was steering the *Simmie and Ann* in to the float. Feodor was nowhere in sight.

Interest gave place to anxiety. She remembered she had not asked Nicolai about the Colonel and Feodor. What could have happened in Rezanoff? She checked her conjectures with the thought that the creole was no doubt below at the engine, and the Colonel had

brought back one of the friends who were ever dropping in on him from remote corners of Alaska.

The launch was close in now and slowing down. The new helmsman was making a good landing. She hoped Colonel Breeze would not try to toss her the line and fall overboard as he had done on several former occasions. She called out a cheery greeting to him and Zoya, and then motioned to the man at the wheel. He gave it a turn, working the wheel-house control of the engine, and ran nimbly to the bow to throw her the rope. She caught it and snubbed the craft to the float.

"Where's Feodor, Colonel?" she inquired, when the half-breed failed to appear.

"Feodor is *hors de combat* for the present," announced Colonel Jeff, pronouncing the foreign phrase exactly as spelled. "But I rustled you some one else in his place, Sasha. Mr. Tynan, here, is a first-class engineer." With a bow and a gesture the Colonel managed an introduction, and then proceeded to explain to the anxious Sasha the stranger's rescue of Feodor, and the latter's plight.

Sasha, though listening to the old fellow's long-winded discourse, was able also to observe the new man, for Tynan did not wait to be told what to do. He was already unloading the supplies.

She was somewhat surprised at his appearance. No one dressed like that in Alaska. The smock, the high, foreign boots, the beard all gave him the look of a brigand. Yet he was not unattractive. She liked his height, and the way his shoulder muscles rippled under the thin smock. She liked the way the old suit-case strap fell low on his narrow hips. His eyes were

very deep and gray beneath the blackness of his hair, and his teeth very white in the tan of his face when he smiled, as he did while helping Zoya, the half-breed, from the launch to the float. All during the Colonel's recital this undercurrent of observation went on in her mind. When the old man finished, something she called her "malamute instinct" had approved of and accepted the stranger.

She stepped aboard the craft and looked down into the concrete-lined pit that was brimming with fresh salmon, whose silver scales caught the light in an iridescent gleam.

"Oh, Colonel, you *did* bring the fox-feed!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid your troubles had made you forget. Zoya, run along, please, and get us an early supper. Afterwards, I shall go with Mr. Tynan on the launch and show him the feeding-stations about the Island. Did you get any mail, Colonel Jeff? Any word from Dad?"

"That I did, Sasha. The *Starr* had a small sack of mail that had been carried by to the West'ard. Here you are, my dear." He held out to her a couple of letters bound together by a rubber band.

Sasha sprang to the float and took them. After a word concerning the storing of the supplies, she tucked the letters in her pocket and followed Zoya to the house.

The wide veranda, with its uprights of spruce logs, was deserted. Seenia had sought her warm corner in the living-room and her porch chair was empty. Beside it, just under the old ship's bell used to call the men to dinner, stood a rough table. It held a copper dish overflowing with blue wind-flowers, and a pack-

age. The package had not been there when Sasha left the house.

She walked over to see what it might be, though she was sure it was one of the large boxes of candy Nicolai sent to San Francisco to get for her,—the kind, so he had told her often, lovers give to their sweethearts in the States. Slipped beneath the string was a folded paper, a sheet hastily torn from a note book. He must have put the note there after she left him on the Lookout.

She drew it out slowly and with conflicting emotions read it. Nicolai had written in Russian, the language of his mother:

"Sasha, forgive me. I am very unhappy."

CHAPTER V

GARY TYNAN watched Sasha leave the float and run up the sloping beach toward the ranch-house. Though he had not consciously given any thought to the girl Colonel Jeff had mentioned as his employer, he had been vaguely prepared for a tall, Amazonian type of woman, dressed in khaki trousers, perhaps, which too snugly defined ponderous hips. It surprised him that this daughter of Alaska, this owner of Rocking Moon, should be so young, and so small and slender. The tumbled, copper-shadowed hair that crowned her head, reached hardly to his shoulder as she stood beside him. When she looked up at him he became suddenly and acutely conscious of his unshaved face and the old smock that had dried on him in wrinkles which made it look even more disreputable than it was. What a bearded barbarian he must seem to her! He stood looking after her, one hand tentatively feeling his jaw. Thank heaven the lump had subsided, anyway!

As he shouldered a gunny-sack of fox-meal he promised himself that he'd borrow the Colonel's razor at the first opportunity, and use it.

"Where to, now, Chief?" He turned to his companion.

Colonel Jeff was engaged in getting a can of beef scraps to his shoulder. "To the barn, my boy. To

the barn," he replied with unintentional metrical effect, as he led the way off the float to the beach. "We'll pack all the fox-food up there, and then take the grub to the house."

Gary followed him along the trail that led through a stretch of rice-grass until it turned abruptly at right angles into a small grove of alders lying between the house and the barn. Lettuce-green ferns spread delicate fronds under the trees and clustered about a circle of gravel, which formed the base of a primitive shower just off the path. He stopped a moment to look at it. Thrust up from the center of the clean white stones was a seven-foot pipe with a curve at the top. Beneath the curve hung a perforated iron kettle such as the early trading companies used to supply their sea-otter hunters for trying out seal oil. The water, not entirely turned off, fell musically into the kettle and dripped on the gravel below.

As Gary walked on he became aware of a silvery tinkle so faint at first he thought he must have been mistaken. But it stirred again; and again it was repeated, thin, illusive, lovely.

"Do I hear bells, Colonel, or don't I?" he asked finally.

"You do, my boy. They're the tree-bells Sasha has strung about here in the alders. See . . . there's one of 'em on that branch yonder. No bigger than a robin's egg. One of the Larianoffs was a captain in the fleet of commerce that took cargoes of Alaskan furs and ivory to China and came back with tea in the old days of the Russian occupation. He brought those little silver bells back from Korea once for his sweetheart—oh, I reckon it must have been all of seventy-five years

ago. Kind of a pretty notion, eh? Tree-bells? Sasha says they bring good fortune and happiness."

Gary caught a silver gleam among the green of the leaves. Tree-bells from Korea! Tree-bells from some exotic garden of the Orient swaying in the wild alders beside the cabin of an Alaskan girl! How alien, he thought, yet how subtly enchanting was this cobweb thread of sound speaking of the far East here on the shores of a Northern sea. Not even a poet's imagination could have conceived such a thing. He felt as if he were playing a part in a quaint romance staged in some lovely, lonely spot the like of which a man might search the world over and never come upon again. . . . Suddenly there stirred in him an appreciation, a realization of the witchery and wonder of life—a feeling which he, in his state of post-war disillusionment, had thought forever lost to him. True, it was but a ghost of that intangible sense of expectant youth that had been his only a few years ago, but it was there—not dead; awakening, perhaps, from a long sleep.

He shifted the sack of meal on his shoulder and quickened his pace to catch up with the Colonel, who was just entering the wide door of the log barn. Under the low beams two great salmon-vats squatted, like fat old squaws. A brick stove, like an oven, had embedded in its top a three-foot iron kettle, clean inside as a platter and ready for the next cooking of fox-food. Gary deposited his burden beside the stove and went out again into the late sunshine.

The Colonel, after showing the newcomer the way, left him to attend to the fox supplies, while he, himself, took the household articles to the kitchen. Gary

was making his last trip when the young mistress of Rocking Moon came out on the veranda of the ranch-house and rang the ship's bell fastened to one of the log pillars. The melodic sound dwelt on the air with singular, intimate homeliness, like hearthstone music. He wondered if that bell, too, was a relic of the sea-faring Larianoff who had brought the others from Korea.

"Supper-time—in ten minutes, Mr. Tynan!" called the girl, with a friendly wave of her hand.

Before the time was up he and the Colonel, whose good-natured face shone from his recent ablutions, were back on the verandah awaiting the summons. When it came, Gary, a little curious, followed his companion into the big, rectangular living-room which extended across the front of the house.

It was a room of very general purpose, containing the furnishings gathered through four generations of Larianoffs. To the wandering Gary it seemed a friendly room with that seductive charm that comes from coziness and homelikeness. The westering sun slanted through the small panes of the oblong windows, pointing a golden finger to the age-darkened portrait of a young man, almost barbaricly princelike in the robes of a Russian arch-priest—the first Anton Larianoff, Gary afterward came to know. Against the smooth, hewed-log walls, unstained except by time, corduroy hangings showed leaf-brown with glints of apricot linings. There was the apricot gleam of old native-copper bowls, dented and flower-filled; the sheen of the silver-and-gold icon and *lampada* in the East corner; the feathery green of hanging plants against the light; the blurred dimness of old rugs trod-

den into monotones. Sturdy home-made chairs promised comfort in the cushioned depths between their arms. The fireplace, primitive in its roughness, was built of brown rock from the sea-beaten cliffs of Rocking Moon. The dying wood fire flickered on the brass of andirons older than civilization in Alaska.

Before the hearth, on the largest brown bear rug Gary had ever seen, squatted a low, wide couch of mahogany, a massive, foreign-looking piece of furniture piled with corduroy cushions, brown, orange, cobalt and olive. The table at its low back held books, the latest magazines and a friendly, parchment-shaded lamp, made evidently from the bowl of a samovar. Over the top of the yellow-keyed piano a kiskillim spread its age-fused colors, and a Russian balalaika lay across a cabinet phonograph. Near the windows facing the alder grove there was the glint of a copper samovar on a massive sideboard, and silver on the supper-table spread with cream-colored linen. With the effect of blending and harmonizing the whole three sides of the room below the deep-silled windows were lined with book-shelves well-stocked with Russian and English volumes.

As Gary looked about him, his ideas of Alaska and Alaskans, formed by reading grim tales of a crude and gloomy North, underwent a complete change. His eyes, with quickened interest, sought the young mistress of the establishment. On their entry she had been leaning over the back of a wide wing-chair which faced the windows framing the bay. She was talking, her bright head bent, to some one in the chair, invisible from where Gary stood.

"Oh, here you are!" She looked up at the two men

with her flashing smile. "We're hungry as bears. Come Seenia—" she held out her hand—"supper-time now. I'll be your escort to the table tonight."

From the depths of the chair a woman slowly rose —the woman with a background of ninety years. But there was none of the repellent emaciation of age about her. In her youth she must have been tall. She was taller now than Sasha, yet her figure, though not stooped, had a look as if the heavy hand of life had pressed it down a little each year. Her coarse, thick hair, white as bleached clam-shells, was parted in the middle and drawn into a knot behind, and in the pale old-ivory of her face, her black eyes seemed to have retreated under the shelf of her brows until they were like shadows on a marble head. Hers was the primitive type of face that registers least the passage of years; yet, when she looked at Sasha and patted the girl's hand, her eyes were soft with that great maternal love which is a characteristic of all Aleut women.

Sasha's manner had in it some of the great indulgence of childhood as she tucked her arm under that of the old nurse, and guided her to the table. A few moments later they were all seated, the girl in her father's big chair at the head, the Colonel entrenched behind the soup tureen at the foot. Gary found that in this household mistress and servants sat down together. He was conscious of that indefinable atmosphere of Northern hospitality which makes the stranger feel at once as if he were a member of the family. Both Sasha and the Colonel talked to him of the plans of the morrow as if he had been with them for months instead of hours. He, who had been homeless for so many years, liked it.

"Now, my boy, tomorrow we make a start salting down salmon for the winter," announced Colonel Jeff, ladling out a bowl of steaming soup. "This is our harvest time, you know. Harvest time even though we're in what so many ignoramuses down in the States insist on terming 'the frozen North.'" He made a contemptuous movement with the ladle, then continued. "The girls here will be busy putting up jellies, and berries and clams, and we have the hay to get for the cow, and two vats to fill with salmon for the foxes. Besides, there's the salmon and herring that we must smoke for family use. I tell you, my boy, the old H.C.L. doesn't trouble us much up here. About all a fellow really needs to live on is a fish-pole, a clam-shovel and a gun, and once you get started garnering in your grub from Mammy Nature's supply, you lose all taste for the highfalutin' grub they feed you in the States." He sat back while Zoya removed the soup tureen. "Why, I can remember that 'gone' feeling I had last year when I went down to California to visit my sister in Burlingame," he continued, applying himself to his soup. "Between minding my manners at the table—on account of the lady flunky keeping tabs at my back—and the foreign food they had, I like to starved, by the infernal Jumbo! And I got such a hankering for smoked salmon, my boy, that I—well, I cut my visit short right after the wedding, and I just naturally burned up the wind getting back home here. Didn't I, Sasha? Yes, sir, one month was enough for me, down there. What I didn't learn about profiteering and bootlegging you could engrave on a poker chip. Of course, I never would have gone Outside but for that wedding—ah, Zoya," he broke off as the

girl placed before him a heaping platter of deliciously browned salmon steaks. He picked up the serving knife and resting an arm on each side of the platter, looked up at her with twinkling eyes. "My dear," he said in his best speaking voice, "could any eatable be more delectable than this piscine delicacy when prepared by your own fair hands!"

Zoya laughed as she put down the plates, and an oblique glance from her lustrous eyes rested a moment on Gary as if to see whether the cheechako appreciated the Colonel's playful, but to her, obscure comments on her cooking.

"Colonel Jeff, you forget how to speak United States!" She smiled banteringly. "You forget all about how to speak United States since you go to Cal-eef-ornia!"

"Tell us something about the wedding," reminded Gary, who was interested in the garrulous old Alaskan's point of view.

"Oh—*that!*" Colonel Jeff waved his knife carelessly. "It was my niece's wedding, and being my only one, I felt as if I ought to be there to give her a send-off. But—never again for me! I'm a simple man, and what with the temperature at a hundred, and me not allowed in my shirt-sleeves, and the rehearsing, and fluffy bridesmaids overrunning the house, and all the swank, I was nearly a total ruin before it was over. By the lord, I couldn't help but contrast it with the nice quiet wedding of Aggie and Jack McGillis, friends of mine in the Interior. I never told you that story, Sasha. It happened in the days when preachers were as scarce as soap in an igloo. I didn't attend the wedding, exactly, but one evening I was floating down the

Yukon in a dory, and I ran up a little slough to a small lake and made camp under a big birch tree. I noticed some scratchings on the bark, so after I got my grub warming up on the camp fire, I goes over to see what it was." The Colonel chuckled as he served himself salmon. "Say, you could'a knocked me down with a feather!" He included the whole table in the swing of his fork. "By the lord, I was looking at a marriage certificate! It's a fact! And this is how she reads": With his fork the Colonel traced imaginary lines on an imaginary tree——

"*'To whom it may concern'*": he began pompously . . .

"*'Ten miles from the Yukon on the banks of this lake,*
For a partner to the Koyukuk, McGillis I'll take.
We have no preacher and we have no ring,
It makes no difference, it's all the same thing.
(Signed) *'Aggie Dalton.'*

"And below it was this:

"*'I swear by my gee-pole under this tree,*
A faithful husband to Aggie I always will be.
I'll love and protect this maiden so frail,
From the sour-dough stiffs on the Koyukuk Trail.
(Signed) 'Jack McGillis.'

"And then, by the lord, came the crowning touch:

"*'For two dollars apiece in cheechako money,*
I unite this couple in holy matrimony.
He be a miner and she be a teacher.
I do the job just as good as a preacher.
(Signed) *'French Joe.'*

"There, Sasha," he finished, helping himself to creamed new potatoes, "how'd you like to be wed under such circumstances, eh? I bet Madam Grundy threw a fit. But I'm here to tell you, children, that this same wedding, without benefit of clergy, you might say, was the beginning of the happiest partnership I know. McGillis struck it rich a few years ago, and he and Aggie have a prune ranch down in California now. They lead an ideal life, absolutely. They stay down there among the prunes four months of the year, and the other eight they spend in Alaska on Jack's claim."

"Dad wrote me they passed through Juneau on their way south the other day, Colonel Jeff," Sasha interrupted, drawing her father's letter from her pocket. She unfolded it, slipping one page over another as she searched for the paragraph. "Oh, bother, I can't find it just now, but Dad also says he's finding wonderful data in the library down there, so many new things that it will take him longer than he expected to finish his book. The Governor's greatly interested in his history, too, and is doing everything he can to help Dad. But Colonel—listen to this. It worries me a little." A faint frown marked a line between her brows as she read from her father's letter:

"'The Governor tells me that many complaints are coming in from the islands used for raising foxes in Southeastern Alaska; that they are being invaded by strangers who kill or carry away domesticated and privately owned foxes. So much of this is being done that the Government is sending out secret service men to trace these fox-pirates. If anything of this nature

happens along the Aleutians, Sasha, have the Colonel go to Kodiak and wire me at once.'"

She ceased reading and looked up at the old man, anxiety in her eyes. "But nothing like that has happened in this section of Alaska, has it, Colonel Jeff?"

"No, no, my dear," he replied with conviction. "Thank God we live so far away from civilization that we're practically immune from the criminal element. I always did say that Southeastern Alaska was about the most lawless place—outside of the United States, of course. It's too durned close to Canada. What with the rum-runners from Prince Rupert, slipping in and out, and every little bay down there having its own bootlegger, you can't expect anything else. Rum-running, fox-pirating, bootlegging—it's all of a piece, I tell you!" And the Colonel, who, if left alone, could trace all calamities and crime to Prohibition, launched out on his favorite topic. "As for fox-poaching," he concluded, "they'd never come this far west. But I'll ask Nick to keep his ears open. He got two men in from the West'ard today. If there's any fox-lifting going on in this vicinity, Nick will be the first to know of it. He handles all the furs from this section of the country, you know." The old fellow nodded reassuringly. "Don't worry your pretty head about that, Sasha."

When the meal was over the girl disappeared, while Zoya busied herself clearing the table. Gary followed the Colonel's example and sought a comfortable chair for his smoke, questioning the Alaskan, in the meanwhile, about the business of fur-farming.

"Sasha will be out in a minute," the Colonel concluded, "and then, my boy, you'll begin to learn the fox business for yourself. I'll carry the feed to the stations nearest the house, and she's going to take you to the stations on the outer beach of the Island. We're giving them raw salmon today, instead of cooked food. By the lord, Gary, do you know, the Rocking Moon ranch is a regular fox Waldorf-Astoria! Sasha pampers her foxes as if they were babies—and she's got a menu a foot long for 'em. But the specialists say that it takes a gentle person to rear a gentle animal, so maybe that's why her Blues are the best in Alaska." The Colonel surrounded himself with a smoke cloud, enjoying it a moment in silence. "Foxes," he continued, dabbing the air with the stem of his pipe, "foxes are damned dainty animals, Gary, there's no getting around that. They're as erratic in their feeding as a prima donna, too. Why, my boy, when Mrs. Baranoff had her pups this June she got that sulky and high-falutin' that she refused to eat *anything,* and she with eight puppies each worth a hundred and fifty dollars or more this December. Sasha was all wrought up about her for a spell, and tried to tempt her with all kinds of delicacies. She wanted her to take milk for the sake of the pups, you know, but that onery vixen just stared out of her burrow with a go-to-blazes look, and refused to eat. Finally Sasha remembered that Mrs. Baranoff liked clams—and didn't that girl get the largest clam shells she could find, and fill 'em with milk, and by the lord, Gary, Madam Baranoff took all she could get!" The Colonel slapped his knee and laughed in delight. "Put one over on the old lady that time, all right."

Gary listened with interest to the little human details of this new industry of the North—the last effort of Alaskans to make a living in their own country under the strangling restrictions of red tape imposed on them by a bureaucracy five thousand miles away. The Colonel went on explosively to tell how this set of thirty-seven bureaus at Washington, D. C., had hermetically sealed for posterity Alaska's coal, oil and timber, but they had not yet succeeded in performing an abortion on the fox industry, and more than a million and a half dollars were already invested in the one hundred and fifty fur farms of the territory.

Colonel Jeff's profane and earnest discourse was at its height, when Sasha, slim and boyish in knickers and a heavy white sweater, appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. She was without a hat, and a light rifle hung over her back by a strap.

She smiled as the Colonel clipped a vociferous sentence in the middle.

"All ready for business, now!" she announced, and after a word to Seenia she led the way out across the veranda. Alexander, the fox, uncurled from a porch chair and followed at her heels. Gary attached himself to the procession heading for the float where the *Simmie and Ann* swung at her moorings.

The trim whiteness of the launch had borrowed a rosy glow from the coral clouds which heralded the sunset. The wind had died away leaving the bay reflecting the tints of the sky. At this hour of the waning day gulls and blackbirds were mute, as if they, too, felt the peace that was enveloping the Northern world.

Sasha sprang aboard the launch and stepped into the wheel-house. In a business-like way she slipped

the rifle from her shoulder and set it in a corner. Her hands sought the spokes of the steering-gear as if she liked the feel of them, and she leaned over to look out the open window, wrinkling her nose like a small wild thing, as the redolence of the forest struck across the cool sea-water.

"I'll take the wheel." She turned to nod as Gary made his stooping way into the engine room.

A couple of half-revolutions of the fly-wheel, a few hollow coughs, a whiff of gasoline, and the mechanism responded in slow, rhythmic throbs that vibrated from stem to stern. At the movement Gary felt that thrill which comes to all those who love the ways of ships —that buoyant sense of "going somewhere."

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Gary came up out of the engine room into the greater freedom of the wheel-house, Sasha was rounding the *Simmie and Ann* on her course along the beach toward Lampadny Point. He took his place back of her, and through the open window watched the changing shore-line, not more than fifty feet away.

Along the curved, gray shingle foxes scampered, stopping now and then to tumble and play like frolicsome puppies. Some sat sentinel-like on drift-logs waiting for their supper-time. Others thrust sharp, inquisitive noses out from behind boulders, watching with shrewd, yellow eyes. Suddenly Sasha made a megaphone of her hands, and sent out the thin, wild bark of the fox. In a moment eager answering yelps drifted across the quiet water with querulous distinctness. She looked up at Gary laughing.

"You see," she said, nodding, "I can talk fox with them." Her hands fell on the wheel again. "I have two feeding stations along here," she continued. "Next year I hope to have all my foxes on this side of the Island. They are much tamer than those living on the outer beach. See those darlings!" she directed, pointing to three weird, small faces peering cautiously at them above a log. "They are this year's puppies. They all love to come out at evening-time and play along the beach."

In Gary's mind the fur trade had always been associated with romantic hardships—the romance of hunters and trappers snowshoeing their lonely ways along the trap-line, across snowy steppes and through icy cañons, in order that Beauty might wrap her white shoulders in furs. And in the background had lurked the grisly specter of Cruelty. He knew little of fur-farming.

"I thought foxes were raised in captivity on these ranches," he began.

"It depends on the kind of fox," explained the girl, with an air of experience that sat quaintly upon her. "Silver-grays do well in captivity, but the Blues, in this part of Alaska, do not. You see, before I persuaded Dad to let me go into this business, I read everything I could find on the subject—and then I went ahead and formulated my own method. A fox loves to run—run as fast as he can. He must stretch his little legs and spring free, hunting and playing and climbing with his mate; nosing about the stumps and the grass and the rocks. I couldn't bear to think of penning the small wild things up in a runway enclosed, even on top, with heavy wire netting, so my Rocking Moon Blues run free and mate according to instinct. They have their burrows, for the most part, along the cliffs in the wildest places, and they make a hundred trails through the forest. The foxes in each colony must keep to the colony trail, or there's trouble, for they're as clannish as—as Alaskans, you know. I'm familiar with every burrow on the Island."

"Rocking Moon looks like a paradise for foxes," commented Gary as he watched the playful antics of the animals on the shore.

The girl steered round a great boulder showing its head above the water. "It is," she answered enthusiastically. "In the spring they get eggs from the crags where the seabirds nest. They have wild berries in the woods and they can get clams and small fish at low tide for themselves. You should see one of them lying beside a rock-pool, fishing, Mr. Tynan! He waits, head on one side, and paw raised for the tiny fish to dart out from under the seaweed, then—quick, like that, he gets it!" She made a swift motion with her hand to show him. "Sometimes a clever one will reach a paw in and roll over a small stone to get something he wants."

"But why, with all this natural food, do you feed them?"

"Because the especially prepared food I give them every other day insures pelts so soft, so thick, so lustrous—but there! You have just to look at Alexander sitting up in the bow, Mr. Tynan. His fur will not be prime for three months yet, but see his color—it is blue of the shadows that lie between snowdrifts under a winter sun!" She turned her vivid face toward him.

The fox, hearing his name, looked back at his mistress, then rose and came toward her. He settled himself on his haunches below her, outside the window of the wheel-house.

"Alexander evidently approves of you," she continued. "Otherwise he never would have come with us this evening. Now, when Nicolai—" she stopped, catching her full under-lip between her teeth. "Yes, foxes *are* friendly creatures," she went on with hurried indirectness. "Some of them that live on this side of the Island are so tame they actually come into the

house, and we have to be careful or they'd establish themselves on the living-room couch!"

"This is the first time I've ever seen a fox that wasn't about a woman's throat," said Gary, resting his elbow against the window and settling himself to watch the course of the launch.

Sasha Larianoff turned to him with a faintly useful look in her eyes. "How different we are," she observed. "Now I—I've never seen a fox about a woman's throat. Up here no one wears furs unless the weather gets so cold it is necessary—and then it takes more than one to keep a person warm. You know, I can't understand a woman's wearing the skin of an animal just for display. It must be the same instinct that prompts the savage to wear a string of bear claws about his neck. But then—I've never been outside of Alaska."

She evidently took his look to be one of surprise, for she hastened to add: "But I'm not without knowledge of other lands. Oh, no! For in books—ah, I have been *everywhere!* The printed page is my magic carpet. In books I become what I please, I go where I please. I voyage to China, to the United States, to Russia, to the South Seas!" She indicated each country with a movement of her hand. "All these strange and beautiful places are known to me. But—perhaps you have really been to some of them, Mr. Tynan?"

Gary was conscious of a hint of wistfulness in the amber eyes she raised to his. He was beginning to find the husky note in her voice singularly charming.

"I have never been to the South Seas," he answered, "but to the others—yes."

"You must tell me of them before you go south

again," she said. Her capable little hands moved rapidly on the wheel as the boat rounded Lampadny Point and met the gentle swell of the ocean.

The launch stood farther off from the shore, now. Above the rice-grass Gary marked the cross of Father Paul standing out against the growing splendor of the evening sky. In answer to his query the girl told him of the old Russian monk whose ways of brotherly love and sacrifice had endeared him, not only to his contemporaries, but to the generations succeeding them. She described for him the summer pilgrimages of remembrance, described them in her engaging, individual way that had in it the half-Oriental intensity of the Russian, and the pictorial clearness of the Alaskan.

Something in the naïve and simple medieval faith of old Muscovian custom surviving in this frontier land touched Gary with a peculiar poignancy. He had been so recently in the country of its origin, where Bolshevism, crying: "Religion is the opium of the people!" was ruthlessly stamping out this very thing that Russia's spiritual adventurers of the past had given their lives to plant in the hearts of an alien and semi-barbarous people. As he listened to the girl, he wondered if she, who read so enthusiastically and perhaps so wistfully of the far-away places of the world, had any conception of the lonely beauty and strangeness of her own land.

When she ceased speaking they were both silent for a time, with that companionable silence that comes naturally to those of the North. The muffled throb of the engine, combined with the vibration of the launch, was curiously detaching in its effect on Gary. It

soothed his material being into a pleasant calm, while it sharpened his spiritual perception.

He watched the low dunes of Lampadny Point slip by. The coast of Rocking Moon grew more rugged, rearing precipitous, spruce-crowned cliffs back of its narrow, pebbled beaches. Bared by the tide, these shingles lay like crescents between the seaward-pointing fingers of the reefs. The tang of growing kelp and seaweed came to him. Down the coast point after point thrust dark lines of rocks out into the slumbering, rose-tinged water. Chameleon-like, the sea had taken on the opalescent color of the sky, and its calm glory contrasted with the wild, darkening shore made him feel as if he were on the eve of some great adventure. His surroundings quickened his imagination, and put a glamour on all things. He was glowingly aware of his own youth and strength, and that of the girl beside him. For no particular reason he was convinced that life here was good; it was clean; it was beautiful, and as unrestricted as the sweep of sea and sky.

The girl's voice aroused him. "The first feeding-station is here between these two reefs," she said, heading the craft toward the shore where the cliffs were cut by a grassy, sloping V. When the *Simmie and Ann* was brought to anchor a short distance from the beach, the skiff that had been in tow astern was drawn alongside. Sasha leaned in the doorway of the wheel-house and directed him as he forked the salmon from the pit into the boxes aboard the smaller boat. When this was accomplished he helped the girl to the skiff, where she seated herself in the stern, placing her rifle across her knees. The clank of the oar-locks came back in musical echoes from the cliffs as Gary rowed landward, and

presently the prow nosed its way among floating amber rockweed and fluted brown ribbons of kelp until it grounded with a soft thud on the shingle.

"This looks like a Chinese outfit." Gary's grin was boyish as he shouldered a wooden yoke from which were suspended two kerosene cans full of salmon—"only it has a wing-and-wing effect, instead of the fore-and-aft." He hitched his shoulders under the edge of the yoke, and steadying the cans with his hands, started up the pebbly slope.

The loaded cans were heavy and in the shifting fine gravel his feet seemed suddenly weighted as he had known them to feel in dreams. The fact that he was closely attended by the young mistress of Rocking Moon prevented his showing his disapproving surprise at the difficulty of the going. Before he crossed many patches of retarding sand, however, he discovered the proper swing that enabled him to progress with greater ease. He noticed that the beach was criss-crossed with the tracks of foxes.

His companion, crunching along in the gravel beside him, stooped to pick up something.

"Look at this!" she exclaimed, holding out the battered shell of a cocoanut. "The drift of many seas comes ashore along these Aleutian Islands." She indicated the high-tide line piled with silvered logs, broken kegs, bits of whale-bone. "But this is the first time I've found a cocoanut shell." Before she tossed it away she held it a moment on the palm of her hand, like a crystal gazer. "Ah, little waif of the seas," she addressed it, with a whimsical shake of her head, "you're a long, long way from your coral strand!"

Their boots crushed the green beach-weed above the

tide line, and the fresh smell of it mingled with the strong iodine odor of dried kelp and dead sea things. They approached a high, rocky bank at the base of which boulders lay piled one on top of another. Bluebells grew in every nook and cranny and small, storm-dwarfed spruce trees, like witches' gnarled hands, thrust out between the crevices. From afar up the shore came the yapping of a sentinel-fox warning his colony of their approach. Gary felt the appeal of the wild loneliness about the shore as he followed Sasha up a gully leading to the top of the bank.

They came out in a growth of wild rice and Indian celery. With a sigh of relief he lowered the cans to the ground and slipped the yoke from his shoulders. Although in perfect physical condition, his experiences of the morning had left him with recurrent spells of dizziness.

As he wiped his perspiring brow with his handkerchief a quick move on the part of his companion attracted his attention. Sasha slipped her rifle-strap from her shoulder and raised the weapon. He followed the direction of her aim. His eye had just succeeded in finding an eagle sitting high in a spruce, then he heard a report and the whine of a bullet. The great bird, with sprawling legs and wings, bumped down through the dark pendant branches of the tree.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Gary, admiring her. "You certainly can shoot!"

"Yes." Her voice was matter-of-fact. "I need to know how. You see, eagles are the greatest enemies my fox puppies have. They carry them off as if they were rats." She slipped the rifle-strap over her shoulder again.

"Our national bird is out of favor in Alaska then."

"He is. He's a menace to all kinds of wild life up here—birds, fish and even animals as large as deer. Dad wrote me the other day about passing one of those tiny islets—little more than rocks—that are so numerous near Juneau. Two young deer had gone over to it evidently at low tide, and been caught when the water rose. They were dashing frantically about, Dad said, like mad things, while a flock of perhaps twenty-five eagles swarmed around them rending and pecking at their eyes. They were blind, of course, when Dad got there, and nearly torn to pieces. He had to shoot them, poor little things, to put them out of their agony. Oh-o-o!" she shuddered. "I can't bear to think of it! It makes my heart hard toward the eagles—until after I've killed one and seen it limp and huddled at the foot of a tree. . . . Life is so cruel, and so beautiful, and so mixed up, some way."

She did not wait for him to speak but made her way along a thread-like trail toward a spruce a few yards distant. Beneath its spreading branches, half hidden in the tall grass, lay a low, flat, box-like affair made of rough lumber. Penetrating as the smell of ammonia came the musky wild odor of foxes.

"These are the box-traps and the feeding-box," announced Sasha.

The latter was a long, narrow wooden tunnel, closed at one end. Near the closed end on top was a lid covering an opening into which the food was placed. The box-traps were made after the same pattern, but were smaller.

"You see," explained the girl, "when trapping sea-

son comes, the foxes have all become so accustomed to entering the feed-box for their food that they have little hesitancy about going into the box-traps when we place it there. Each trap has a drop-door over one end. It is set on a wire, and the food so placed that when the animal goes in to get it, he springs the wire and the door comes down, closing him in. He is then taken out through that slide in the top, you see, unharmed." She showed him how it was done.

"All my foxes are tattooed in the ear. My original stock carries the mark RM—for Rocking Moon, you know, and this year's puppies are marked RM-1, because they are the first of the Rocking Moon breed. None of them are to be killed for pelts. They are more valuable for breeding purposes, and when the time is right we shall trap them and those I intend to sell will be taken to those corrals you saw back of the barn, and kept there until their future owners come for them." She paused to point out to him the eager little faces of several foxes peering from behind tree trunks.

"But when they are taken for the fur," she continued, "the box-trap permits the keeper to select those that are prime only—letting the others free, and then —with just one injection of strychnine into the thoracic cavity the little fellows pass painlessly away almost *instantly.*"

Gary, placing the salmon according to her directions, made a general comment contrasting the humane way of trapping with the legalized cruelty of the trap-line. When he finished, she turned to him and spoke with sudden intensity.

"But do you *know* the way of the trap-line—and

that instrument of torture, the steel trap? Do you know how it is hidden in places where the wild things go, its gaping, steel-toothed jaws covered with leaves? Do you know how it closes on the leg of the unwitting animal, crushing its bones, holding the creature there hour after hour, sometimes day after day in agony, in hunger and thirst and cold, until the trapper comes to dispatch it?" The girl's face had grown pale and her eyes nearly black as she spoke. "And do you know that out of every hundred animals so trapped, twenty gnaw off their own feet in order to free themselves? Oh, Mr. Tynan, when I think of the hundreds of hours of torture that go into the making of a fur wrap, I pray for the time when all fur will be raised on fur-farms! But—we won't talk of that any more." She shook her head vigorously. "I shall tell you about my own foxes.

"All the year round, you know, they will go into the boxes for feed, but when the skins are prime—it's a strange thing—some of them develop an intuition that's positively uncanny. Feodor told me that we had three kings last year that were so smart they'd crawl into the trap for food but leave their tails hanging out. The trap-door, of course, dropped down, but when the foxes finished eating, they merely twisted their tails upward, raised the door, and—pooph! out they went free as the birds!"

They laughed in unison as she graphically pantomimed the escape, and Gary bent to examine the traps

When he raised his head, Sasha was a short distance away in a patch of salmon-berry bushes, popping glistening red berries into her mouth like a little girl. She beckoned him with a stained finger.

"See back there through the trees—that silver gleam?" she called. "That's Toyon Lake. It curves across the Island and the other end of it is not far from the house. I have a bidarka and a rowboat on it. The bidarka is for pleasure; the rowboat for use when the weather is too stormy to take the launch around the Island. We carry the feed with it then to the stations near the lake. . . . We'll get the eagle's feet now, for there's a bounty on them, Mr. Tynan, and then we'll go, for we have many other stations to visit before we go home."

As they were retracing their steps toward the beach Sasha paused at the top of the bank.

"Oh, look at the ghost-moon!" she cried, pointing eastward toward Oo-koon.

Up over the rim of the sea a moth-white moon was rising, though the sun still painted the western sky. "Now we *must* hasten," she said.

She looked up at him, suddenly losing her serious air. "I wonder . . . I wonder if I could beat you to the boat!" she challenged, roguish speculation in her eyes.

Gary was becoming accustomed to her rapid changes of mood. He grasped the handles of his kerosene cans and answered promptly:

"All right, we'll see. One—two—*three!*"

They flew down the gully to the metallic jangle of tin cans, and sped across the shingle. Gary, at the start, had some benign notion of allowing the girl to get ahead of him, but he suddenly found himself hard put to it even to keep up with her. With her white sweater and outspread arms, she skimmed before him like a bird, until, simultaneously, they arrived

at the grounded skiff. She sank laughing on the gunwale.

"Of course," she panted, brushing the hair back from her face, "you were handicapped by your cans, so it wasn't really a fair race. Now, Nicolai never will race with me, since we've grown up. He says young women of my age down in the States don't do such things. He—" Again she bit her lip. "But no matter," she continued with her dismissing shake of the head. "We'll get back to the *Simmie and Ann* now, or Alexander will think we've deserted him."

They continued their way to the other feeding-stations. Gary asked the girl questions and she explained the different phases of the work he was to do. When the last box had been supplied, they left behind them the ghost-moon turned to silver.

"We'll go on around the Island, now. It's nearer than going back the way we came," said Sasha. "Full speed ahead, Mr. Engineer!"

The launch shot out beyond a bold, dark headland into the full of the sunset. Everywhere in the west was light and color. The distant mountain range, plum-tinted and without detail, lay against a glorious expanse of molten gold. A herring-boat, limned in deep purple, chugged toward Rezanoff towing a line of purple dories in its wake. The last touch of the sun gilded the spruce tops on Windward Island. Gary fell further under the spell of the Alaskan night. There was a fascinating unreality about it all, a touch of enchantment. The colors about him were so pure, so clear, so ethereal, he felt as if he had stepped into some exquisite fanciful illustration which depicted a red-headed girl, a fox with weird yellow eyes, and a slim dark

young man driving swiftly over the water in a dream-boat, whose cleaving prow left two lines of amethyst shimmering obliquely across an amber sea.

It was a strange and beautiful world in which he found himself, yet he felt akin to it. And he felt akin to the girl who called it home. What would she say, he wondered, if he, a bearded, smocked and penniless stranger, should place a hand on her sturdy little shoulder and tell her so. The whimsical idea stirred his sense of humor. Perhaps, he thought, a flicker of a smile in his gray eyes, she'd order him to jump overboard, or set Alexander on him. Perhaps—she might even understand that expansive feeling of friendliness and contentment engendered by her country. Anything delightful might happen up here in the North.

His mind lingered on the thought a moment as he glanced at the piquant profile under the tumbled bright hair. Then he realized all at once that he was "broke," he was stranded in a strange land, yet—he was happier than he had been for years. "And can a man be more than happy?" he asked himself, unwittingly speaking the words of the old Irish proverb.

The girl turned to him.

"I must have been thinking aloud," he explained.

"Then *you* feel all this, too!" she spoke half wonderingly, her face brightening with instant comprehension. "And you have lived in the big United States! Oh, I am glad! You see I love my country, and I want others to see in it what I do. I want you to like it especially, for I feel responsible for your troubles. If it had not been for my bad Feodor, you would have been far on your way South tonight."

"I'd rather be here," he answered. An impulse of

confidence led him to continue. "After all, it doesn't matter much where I am. I've been mining in Siberia. Went in by way of Japan after the war was over. But the White Guards and the Bolsheviki are making it too difficult for Americans there. The only thing I was able to bring away with me is this little souvenir of my last meeting with the Reds who confiscated my property. See—" He bent his head and brushed aside the heavy black hair. At sight of the scar the girl gave an exclamation of surprise and concern. "I decided to let things cool down before I went back." As he finished he tossed his head, smoothing the hair back in place. "But my troubles—you mustn't give them a thought, Miss Larianoff. I don't—any more." He leaned back against the wall and laughed down at her, unaware of his own dark picturesqueness as he quoted:

"'Afoot and light-hearted I take the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long, brown path before me leading wherever I choose.'

"Only it's not a long brown road up here," he concluded, with a wave of his hand ahead of them. "It's a 'path of gold' tonight."

To his astonishment the girl paraphrased;

"'So henceforth you ask not good fortune—you yourself are good fortune,
Henceforth you whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Strong and content you travel the open road!'"

She looked at him and smiled slowly. "You know," she said, "that's the way I like to see a man taking adversity. And Dame Fortune, being a woman, could not desert a man who thinks like that!"

They talked on, now laughing, now serious, but always with a consciousness of delightful personalities yet to be revealed. Presently he took the wheel, and the two fell into silence as the launch rounded Lookout Point into the little home bay. He headed for the float, hidden now in the purple of penumbral shadows.

He was preparing to attend to the mooring of the boat, when Sasha swung her rifle to her shoulder, and with a word to Alexander, started toward the house.

"Good night!" she called. Her friendly voice, with its charming huskiness, floated back through the twilight. "Pleasant dreams!"

At the words a strange little start went through him. They brought his childhood back to him for a moment, vividly, warmingly. His mother had always said: "Good night, dear. Pleasant dreams!" No doubt other women said good night in just that way, but he had never heard it again until now. He, who was alone in the world and homeless, wondered why such a simple thing should bring him a feeling of home.

When the girl vanished he busied himself setting the *Simmie and Ann* to rights for the night. He liked boats, and the task was a pleasure. He finished and stood a while on the float, wiping his hands on a piece of waste, and looking about him with eyes accustomed to noting all the details of his surroundings. The cool tang of salt water and damp wood came up from the logs beneath him. The soft, eager whisper of the incoming tide sounded on the pebbles of the beach. The

moon that he had seen rise silvery and ghost-like from the sea by Oo-koon, now hung high and golden over the dark line of trees inked against the sky back of the ranch-house. As if the beauty of the night had found voice, a golden-crown sparrow, at long intervals, faintly and sleepily sent out its three plaintive, descending notes from the alders where the tree-bells hung.

Presently Gary found himself speculating about Sasha Larianoff and the smoldering-eyed Nicholas Nash. What had happened that afternoon when the trader came to call? What had Colonel Jeff meant when he said: "By God, I hope Nick doesn't get her!"

Gary did not know how long these thoughts occupied him, but when he came back to a consciousness of the present, it was with the feeling that he had been hearing for some time a sound alien to the tranquillity of the night. All the color had faded from the west, and the little tower on top of Lookout Point was a silhouette against a star-pricked sky. Like the quick throb of a heart the sound came floating into the sheltered bay from the outer waters. He turned to look.

Afar and going swiftly toward the east he saw a launch. It was low and almost one with the blurred distance, for it carried no lights. It was not until he turned his steps toward the house that he remembered the launch of Nicholas Nash, with its unmuffled exhaust.

Ten minutes later in his room under the eaves his last thoughts were of the young trader at the wheel of the *Seal Pup* driving his craft recklessly through the night waters, his devil-ridden eyes fixed on—what?

CHAPTER VII

ON a sunny morning two weeks later, Gary came swinging out of the forest, an axe in one hand, a bundle of alder-wood on his shoulder. He was bare-headed and under his heavy black hair his clean-shaved face had an eager boyish look.

He paused before the smoke-house, from the roof of which a thin, blue vapor lent the air a piquancy of hard-wood smoke and curing fish—a tang he already found peculiarly agreeable. He tipped back his head to look up at the sky, exposing the line of his brown, fine-textured throat. A wedge of geese flying south voiced the approach of autumn, and he watched their flight against the blue before he swung the bundle from his shoulder and entered the dim, cool pungency of the smoke-house.

Half-smothered hard-wood coals in the middle of the dirt floor sent up their savor toward the opening in the roof. The light from the doorway fell on rows of steel-blue herring hanging above the fire and red lines of split salmon glazing to an oily brown. Gary dexterously replenished the wood. Afterward he sniffed appreciatively and reaching up cut himself a piece of salmon, rose-pink beneath the smoked outside. He had already proved the truth of the Colonel's statement that a man "got a hankering for smoked salmon."

Through the open door he saw Colonel Jeff, bare-headed and in his shirt-sleeves, stepping along the trail toward the fox corral back of the barn. The Colonel held a bottle of hair tonic carefully in one hand; his mastodon-ivory cane in the other thumped the ground, keeping time to a tuneless, rumbling song. It came out in jerks, as if he were scanning verse:

"'Wheel—the per-am-bu-la-t-or, Bill,
An' wheel—her might-ty slow.
Don't get wild—but mind the child,
Be careful—how—you go—, Damn it!"

The last words marked a stubbed toe, then the Colonel was on his way again.

"'If you—should round—the cor-ner, Bill,
Or try—to cross—the road,
Just lift—the front—wheels up—a bit,
An' don't—up-set—the load!'"

He set the bottle on the ground with a grunt, and opened the door of the corral. Once inside he shook the tonic vigorously.

"My dear fellow," he spoke conversationally, though no one was in sight, "the enjoyment of alcohol, as you no doubt know, has been confined by law to the upper classes. I'm surprised, sir, surprised that you fail to appreciate what I have for you." The Colonel paused, looking expectantly over his glasses at the far corner of the pen.

A weird, tiny face appeared in the opening of a low, wooden den. Two yellow unblinking eyes stared out

for an instant, then a small creature, resembling a Mexican hairless dog, came trotting out into the sunlight.

"*Good* morning, Sampson!" Colonel Jeff addressed the ugly mite heartily. "Good morning, you poor little son-of-a-gun!" Through the meshes of the wire netting Gary saw him thrust the point of his cane into the ground and sit heavily on a box, placing the bottle beside him. The animal advanced, until the Colonel put out both hands and picked it up. He stretched it across his knees with clumsy gentleness. There it lay in perfect trust, while the old man poured a bit of the liquid into the palm of his cupped hand.

"Sampson, my lad," he wrinkled his nose until his glasses moved up and down, "this darned stuff smells bad enough to grow whiskers on a baby's chin." He slapped the tonic on the animal's back. "I—" The sentence ended with a low whistle as he bent to scrutinize Sampson.

"By the—syncopated—damn!" he bellowed with delight. "I believe I *do* see hair! Hey! That you, Gary?" He looked up to see the young man standing at the door of the corral. "Come in here. I've got something to show you." The little fox gave a squirm of enjoyment.

"Doesn't that look like the beginnings of fur?" the Colonel demanded triumphantly as Gary approached. He pointed to the back of the hairless Sampson. "I've used everything from mange cure to crude oil, and by the lord, it's *time* Nature was doing her part!"

"But why all this barber-shop stuff, Colonel Jeff?"

"Well, it's like this, my boy. About one in every two hundred fox pups comes hairless—'Sampsons' the

ranchers call 'em. That means death to the little cusses —no fur, no live. Of course, Feodor and I could have killed this one before Sasha learned of it—as other ranchers generally do. But, some way, I hated to do it before I gave him a chance. . . . And then the labels on those bottles of hair tonic are so blamed enticin', you know. But what do you think—" Colonel Jeff looked up hopefully over his glasses. "Don't it look like hair?"

The young man good-naturedly examined the faint fuzz on the creature's back, and if he had any doubt, his hearty "yes" did not betray it. He held the bottle, dropping the dark liquid on Sampson's hide while the Colonel rubbed it in.

Gary's two weeks as a substitute for the bibulous Feodor had brought him into a delightful world of new activities. Farm life on Rocking Moon was like nothing he had ever read of or known. Against the background of his memory he arranged his meager knowledge of agricultural labor in the States. At best there was associated with it always an element of drudgery:—the dust of traveled roads; long hours of harvesting in the broiling sun; physical weariness that rendered a man fit only for sleep at the end of the day. This much he knew from observation.

Up here, where he was actually performing the work of the "hired man," he could say with truth: "I rise at dawn from a bed of perfect health, refreshed, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of Autumn!"

Those mornings of a year or more ago seemed like a dream now—a nightmare, though the memory of their slow horror sometimes came back to threaten him. The awakening with a dull sense of the utter futility

of everything; the black, stagnant hours at his typewriter waiting in vain for ideas, fumbling in the dim, crowded chaos of his brain for words, which once had overwhelmed him with a very ecstasy of creativeness; the despairful facing of the fact that he had lost his power to write, lost it just as he had begun to have success in the short-story field of literature. And the greatest horror of it was that he could see no reason for it. He was physically fit, but mentally he had come back from the war old at thirty-one. And yet—he was also pitifully like a very small boy who has awakened alone in the dark, and fearful, gropes for some one to cling to; some one to comfort him. Only the evening before, as he and Sasha stood on Lookout Point watching the sunset from the watch-tower, he was on the point of telling her all this. But he did not. How could he tell her that he had given up the work he loved best in the world because every effort of his to concentrate brought forth hideous, shadowy images that loomed through the reek and fog of high explosives; men sprawled in grotesque fantastic attitudes of death; men horribly engrossed in plugging their own gaping wounds that oozed slow red streams. He could not tell her because he feared she might think him a weakling. Instead he talked to her of hay-cutting, for it was harvest time.

Heights above the sea always brought Gary a feeling of exhilaration, and he liked to recall the consciousness of sheer youth and strength that possessed him when he and the Colonel swung their scythes through the sweet, wild hay that grew in the meadows skirting the edge of the cliffs. The sea-wind tempered the sunshine, and ruffled his hair. Gulls soared and

slanted companionably over him. Blackbirds chattered intimately to him from the forest as he worked.

Afterward, with Sasha and Zoya, who insisted on helping, they tied the hay into fish-netting and, to the accompaniment of shouts and laughter, rolled the bundles to the lip of the cliffs, sending them whirling to the beach far below. Then came the loading of the big dory, and the towing of it home in the wake of the *Simmie and Ann,* while the two girls sat on top of the load singing old Russian melodies, the harmony of which came to Gary above the throb of the engine.

There had been other days when the young man and Colonel Jeff went to the nearest cannery and brought back a launch-load of salmon. Gary had come to take a positive pleasure in his deftness at cleaning, splitting and salting down fish. The two great vats in the barn were full now, one with salmon and one with salmon-heads for the foxes; and the winter store of smoked fish for the table was well on the way.

One day Sasha had taken him down into the cellar and with housewifely pride had shown him her provisions, everything gathered, as the Colonel had said, from the storehouse of old Mother Nature. Row after row of glass jars made the shelves colorful and singularly tempting, revealing, as they did, the cream-white of clams, the red and yellow and blue of wild berries, the transparent amber and garnet of jellies, the rose-lavender of preserved rose-petals, which the mistress of Rocking Moon served with her Russian tea. There were buckets of sea-gull eggs and sea-parrot eggs, which Sasha and Zoya had gathered from the cliffs in June, and put down in water-glass; small barrels of silver eulicon, the finest fish that swims; and, hidden

discreetly in the shadow of the stairway, a keg of salmon-berry juice, which, in the absence of Father Anton, was undergoing unlawful fermentation under the expert guidance of Colonel Jeff, who daily assured the protesting Sasha that he was making the wine for medicinal use only.

All this old-fashioned preparation for the winter brought Gary a feeling of homely comfort. He remembered experiencing the same thing when he read certain of Whittier's poems. He, too, was beginning to know that contentment and simple happiness which comes of living close to Nature and trusting in the land. Alaska in summer was a gay, kind young mother pouring out her bounty with the prodigality of youth to those who would receive it.

He spilled another small stream of hair restorer on the back of the hairless Sampson, and as the Colonel rubbed it in, the cheechako began reluctantly counting off the days until the next steamer should arrive to take him on his way south. The world of wars and strikes and business strife suddenly seemed very far away, very undesirable, and strangely unimportant.

Meanwhile the Colonel rubbed and talked.

"It's like meandering along the back trails of the past, talking to you, my boy," he said, slipping from one incident to another. "Now there's my friend Split-the-Wind," he continued, giving Sampson a last rub before setting him down on the ground. "He was an Eskimo. Gave me that cane—" He handed the object to Gary, pointing out the small pieces of hollowed-out ivory that were slipped over a steel rod to make it strong. "Nice work, that, eh? He was a clever cuss, in more ways than one. 'Most too clever." The Colo-

nel chuckled. "He saw that the missionaries rarely did any manual labor—which is the only kind of work the Eskimo knows—and still they apparently collected enough money to live on. He just couldn't get it through his head. One day he asked the clergyman in charge of the mission at Kobuk what he did to *earn* that money. 'Preach the gospel, and collect in the name of God!' answered the good man.

"Well, Split-the-Wind pondered on this a long time, and then he quit fishing and went to the next village where there was no church. He got a crowd of natives together and made a speech. Afterward he took up a collection. He repeated this week after week until the church people got wind of it and had him arrested, by the lord! . . . Well, I was Commissioner then at a little camp to the West'ard, and Split was brought before me for trial." The Colonel laughed reminiscently as he knocked the bowl of his pipe against the edge of the box. "My boy, I didn't know what to do. I looked at him as sternly as I could and said: 'Now look, here, Split! Don't you know you've been collecting money under false pretenses, and that makes you all same thief?' The old devil looks at me with that darned innocent look those people can get. 'Oh, no-o-o-o! *No-o-o-o!*' he protested, shaking his black head. *'Me* no thief. Me *g-o-o-t* man. Me preach Gospel—all same him—' he pointed out the indignant minister. 'Then me say: For God's sake, give *me* money! Me no say: Give me money for *God's* sake!' "

The Colonel finished his impersonation of the Eskimo with a hearty laugh and a resounding slap on his knee. "Nick always enjoyed that story, Gary," he went on, as he lighted his pipe. "Nick hasn't much

use for the missionaries or the priests. By gosh! I wonder what's happened to the boy lately. He hasn't been over to see Sasha since you came, Gary. I heard he was on a *macoola* spree last week, though. He can go just so long without drinking, and then—look out. . . . A lot of the natives think he's in league with the Old Boy himself because he's just leased the Island of Oo-koon for a fox-ranch. None of them will go near it for love nor money, not only on account of the volcano, which is as safe as God's pocket, but the great Cave of Oo-koon is full of mummies—or it used to be. The Aleuts used to embalm their dead, you know, and hang 'em, like strings of peppers, in caves. Devilish gruesome, to my mind. That's why I can't figure out why Nick took that island, because he'll always have to get outsiders to work there for him. . . . We must take a run over there some day, Gary, after our heavy work is over. He's just getting started." The old man rose and stood on wide-spread legs stretching luxuriously. "Heigh-o!" he yawned, glancing up at the sky. "Looks as if we might have a blow before night."

The sun shone, but the blue was streaked with wind-clouds like bits of blown chiffon, and fitful gusts came whispering through the alders, setting the tree-bells tinkling. The murmur of the sea had deepened to a muted hollowness. From the height where they drew a black line against the clouds the calling of geese came down—*on-konk—on-konk—on-konk.*

"See how low they're flying! Sure sign of a storm," prophesied the Colonel, squinting upwards. "She'll blow, all right, and there'll be a lot of birds coming in to Toyon Lake. I wouldn't be surprised, Gary, if

you'd get some good shooting there late this afternoon. . . . How you coming on with the bidarka?"

"Fine, though I'm far from expert yet. It's great sport," Gary replied, stopping to watch Sampson scramble to the top of his den, before he and Colonel Jeff went their respective ways.

Gary had been looking forward to the opening of the shooting season, both because he wanted to supply the household with enough ducks for the winter canning, and because travel in the bidarka, which floated light as a bubble on the waters of Toyon Lake, was fascinating. The least motion of the double paddle sent it skimming swiftly along the surface of the lake like a waterbug. Several times he had carried it across the short distance between the end of Toyon and the ocean, and launched it in the sea. It took greater skill to manage the cranky little craft on the rollers, but Gary, after repeated duckings, had mastered it one Sunday, while Sasha instructed him from the shore.

When the young man finished his day's work, the afternoon was far gone and Colonel Jeff's prediction of a storm was coming true. Blue sky and sunshine had given place to the fantastic beauty of mauve clouds driven before a swift wind. The forest back of the ranch-house rocked in a very abandonment of freedom and mingled its exultant voice with that of the rising sea. Rain would come later. The buffetings of the wind exhilarated Gary. Sasha, too, seemed to be sensitive to the stimulation of the storm, for as he ascended the steps of the wide veranda he heard her playing Tschaikovsky—lusty, virile chords in keeping with the spirit of the borning gale. She, like all Alaskans, rarely complained about the weather. These Northern-

ers looked upon it as something to be enjoyed in all its moods, like an ever changing spectacle put on for them by a master stage director.

As Gary entered the living-room, taking with him a breath of out-of-door freshness, Sasha looked up from the piano, one hand poised for the striking of a chord, and smiled at him. She had delightful little mannerisms in playing, copied unconsciously from her emotional Russian father, who had been her only teacher.

"I'm going to run over to the Lake before supper and get a few ducks," announced Gary, passing on through to the back hall where the rifle and shot-gun hung on the gun-rack.

"*Just* what I've been wanting to do," approved Sasha, rising promptly. "Wait for me, Gary." She disappeared into her own room off the living-room.

When he took down the shot-gun he remembered he had left his shell-vest upstairs in his room. He ran up the steps and started along the dim, unfinished hall, past the rooms of Zoya, Seenia and the Colonel. His own lay under the sloping eaves at the other end. Suddenly he stopped, his head in the alert attitude of listening. The noise of the rising gale had rendered inaudible the pad of his rubber-soled tennis shoes; but it did not prevent his hearing a peculiar, weird crooning that threaded through the sound of the wind. For a moment he could not locate the source of it—then comprehension came. It was Seenia in her room. Perhaps, he thought, she was afraid of the storm. Devout old soul, no doubt she was praying.

He smiled indulgently as he tiptoed past her half-open door. He could hear her plainly now. Her words were English, but—Gary stiffened—they rose

in an eerie chant of broken minors—a cadence older by thousands of years than Christianity.

"Spirits—I call! I call!" The thin old voice soared and sank. "Come to me—on the wind—the East wind of Oo-koon. . . . Spirit of my father, the whaler. . . . Spirit of my mother, the dancer. . . . Come to me. Tell me truth. . . . Spirit of fire—spirit of Oo-koon, come to me. Tell me truth! Where is it? Oh, where does it hide?"

Gary felt a queer, prickling thrill pass through him. He glanced into the room. The native woman squatted flat on the floor before her low window that faced the East where the gray bay whitened under the lash of the wind. Her body was huddled strangely. A second later, shamed by his involuntary eavesdropping, he hurried past the door to his own room.

Seenia! Seenia, whom he had seen each day crossing herself devoutedly every time she passed the icon in the living-room, was calling for help—and she called on the heathen spirits of her ancestors!

CHAPTER VIII

GARY'S mind was still busy with the strange scene upstairs when he rejoined Sasha in the living-room. But he said nothing to her about it.

The girl was clad in a native kamelayka, a waterproof shirt with a hood, made of walrus-gut, thin and transparent like oiled silk. It was yellow and light as gauze, and its many seams were picked out with bits of gay colored yarn. She handed Gary a garment like her own. "It will be raining before we get back," she said.

She swung along the path before him, her arms stretched out like wings to the buffeting of the wind. On each side of them the rice-grass lay over as if pressed down by some invisible giant hand. At the float, even in the sheltered bay, the *Simmie and Ann* was bobbing up and down, sprayed by foam and spin-drift. The basso of the sea, sounding with increasing volume, told of the mounting breakers beating against the outer cliffs of Rocking Moon.

"Oh, how glorious, Gary!" she called back. "The storm always says: 'Come out and play! Come let me toss you in my mighty arms!' . . . Look!"

They both stopped, looking upward. A flock of swans was flying low, with human-like cries bewildered and lonely. "See how they all keep time!" The girl

made a flying motion with her hands. "The Aleuts say they call that way to encourage each other to keep the stroke with their wings on the long journeys."

"Like sailors singing chanties at their work," suggested Gary. *"Row, brothers, row!"* he sang, and Sasha joined him instantly, while both of them kept time with their hands. At the end of the verse they faced one another, and laughed, delighted with themselves. A few vagrant, wind-driven drops splashed against their faces.

Before they entered the narrow trail that led through the forest to the Lake, their kamelaykas were shedding rivulets of water.

But beneath the high, rocking branches of the trees it was still, and cool, and dim as twilight. Not a drop had yet penetrated to wet the moss and brown spruce needles which upholstered the ground between the tree trunks. Yet everywhere stirred the savor of clean earth, and bark, and fallen leaves. The crashing of the storm passed high overhead, giving Gary a new keen realization of physical safety which had in it a touch of primitive satisfaction. He felt that it must be a feeling akin to that pleasure and comfort which wild things know when they are snuggled in moss-lined burrows under the roots of trees. He smiled at himself, as he recognized Sasha's influence in this thought that had come to him. She was forever telling him the ways of wild things in a curious intimate fashion, just as a girl in the States might chronicle the doings of her chums.

He glanced at the little figure swinging sturdily along beside him. She had been silent for some time. Wisps of bright hair escaped from the edge of the kamelayka

hood, framing her rain-wet face. She looked very small among the great brown trunks of the trees, like some elfin creature in a forest fairy tale. He found himself marveling again at this child-woman, whose only knowledge of civilization had been gained through books and the occasional mediocre moving-pictures that once or twice a year came to Rezanoff.

She was a girl who could lay aside the most feminine bit of sewing, and come, eager as an adventurer, to hang over a chart of Alaskan waters, or a map of foreign lands. The two had already spent delightful hours at this sort of map-travel. He had heard her, evenings by the living-room fire, quote gravely some bit of ancient philosophy, and a few minutes later recite for Seenia the lilting *King of the Yellow Butterflies.* He had heard her play the *Song of the Volga Boatmen* with an emotional intensity that plunged him into the sorrow, the labor, the night of Russian peasants drawing their loads ploddingly along the marge of the swift-running river; and while the spell of this was yet upon him, she had dashed off into a flippant, syncopated bit from the latest American musical comedy—this last learned by ear from a phonograph disk. He had listened to her directing Zoya, with the precision and domestic knowledge of a New England housewife, and come upon her immediately after, squatted before the patient but bored Alexander, whose front paws she would be patting together forcing him to keep time to some foolish little nursery rhyme she was repeating. She was as unconscious of conventions as a baby, and once having admitted him to her friendship she treated him with boyish camaraderie. He found her wholesome joyousness singularly refreshing. *Solnishko*

moyo, my little sun, was the endearing name Zoya often called her. It suited her, someway. He did not wonder that Nicholas Nash wanted her. Yet he found himself hoping, as fervently as the old Colonel, that the trader would not get her. And he, Gary, had known her only two weeks.

They neared the edge of the woods where the wind-ruffled water of the lake showed through the tree-trunks. Sasha, pink of face and sparkling of eye, turned to look up at him.

"We'll take the bidarka here and with the wind behind us, scoot up to the other end to the marshes and the sloughs. That's where the birds take shelter in rough weather," she directed, as they emerged at the water's edge where the reeds bent under the stress of the wind.

The skin boat lay under a tree.

They launched it and before climbing into the man-holes, drew the hoods of the kamelaykas about their faces.

"We'll be as snug and dry as if we were in a submarine," laughed Gary, as, following Sasha's directions, he spread the hem of his water-proof over the rim of the man-hole and tightened the draw-string to keep out the rain.

The bidarka, needing but a touch of the guiding paddle, skimmed like a brown leaf before the wind, while the lapping chop of the lake slapped over it. Slanting rain silvered the green of the trees along the shore. Against his thin kamelayka Gary felt the storm pelting his back, though not a drop came through. It was a delightful sensation—a feeling of safety and of at-one-ness with the elements.

Just so, he thought, had the Aleut sea-otter hunters of Baranoff's time struck out in their bidarkas, scudding before the wind into the very vortex of fearful seas, headed for the lea of Sanak and the Chernaboor Rocks where the otters lay resting from the storm, their globose heads buried in heaps of brown kelp. He never tired of hearing Sasha and the Colonel tell of the days before the Americans came. The stories fired his imagination—though he found himself unable even to outline a plot in which to use any of the story material that lay about him. He planned, before he left the fox-ranch, to take the bidarka across that thirty-mile stretch of sea between Rocking Moon and the Island of Oo-koon—if he could get anyone to occupy the other man-hole. He wondered if Sasha would be afraid to go with him, a cheechako.

He glanced at the back of her head, where her hair showed red-gold through the wet transparency of the kamelayka hood, and shouted the question. But the wind snatched the words off his lips.

Almost too soon the bidarka nosed the reeds at the farther end of the Lake, and Gary, gun in hand, climbed out to the bank. He was soon drenched from the knees down, from crawling through the wet grass to creep up on wild flocks under the lea of the banks. Sasha paddled the boat around to pick up his kill.

At the end of an hour he had a dozen mallard and widgeons, and four geese. He had gone hunting many times in the rice-fields of California, bagging the number of birds allowed by law, but never had he felt just the satisfaction that was his now, when, wet to the skin, and smelling of crushed grass and water-soaked

feathers, he stepped back into the man-hole of the bidarka. Hunting took on an added zest when food, instead of sport, was the object.

Both he and Sasha paddled with all their strength against the wind, making slow time on the homeward stretch. The gale increased, and the scudding clouds descended until they mingled with the tossing tree-tops. The light was growing dim when they drew the bidarka up in its berth, and retraced their steps through the dripping forest, each one carrying a share of the birds. This was Sasha's arrangement.

Laughing, the two stamped into the warm, lamp-lighted kitchen, and laid the result of their hunting at the feet of the welcoming Zoya.

"Fee, fi, fo, fum!" Sasha pursed her red lips and spoke with mock ferocity. "I smell beef mull-i-*gun!* And coffee! *And* apple something!" She wrinkled her little nose and sniffed hungrily. "Supper isn't over, is it, Zoya?"

"Yes, *solnishko,* but I have for you both a surprise," announced the girl, helping Sasha out of her dripping kamelayka. "I have set for you the small table before the fireplace, so you shall be cozy after your wet hunting. And guess what I have—" she looked at the rain-beaten Nimrods with bright, dark eyes, her teeth showing white in a smile. "I have made very special, very delicious, an *apple cobbler with whipped cream!*" she finished with an air of triumph.

"Oh, glub! glub!" The gusto with which Sasha uttered these cryptic sounds indicated complete appreciation. She threw an arm about Zoya's waist in an affectionate, bear-like hug. "You angel-lamb!"

"I second that remark, Zoya," Gary called out as he

ascended the stairway. "I'm that hungry I could eat boiled owl!"

An hour later the table was cleared and the squat reading-lamp cast its yellow cone of light on every member of the household sitting close to the leaping flames in the fireplace. Alexander had just succeeded for the first time in performing the trick Gary had been trying to teach him for the last week. At the words: "Bring me my coat, Alex!" the fox had dragged the young man's coat to him and dropped it across his knees. The animal stood now with its two forefeet against Gary's chest, snuggling its nose down the neck of his open shirt, while that ticklish young man tried to fish a package of cigarettes from his coat pocket. Sasha and Zoya watched, smiling, from the divan, and the Colonel, from the depths of his own cushioned chair, was using the stem of his pipe to emphasize his comparisons of other storms with the one now raging.

Seenia, who generally sat dozing in the evening, was alert tonight, her deep-set eyes bright like a bird's. When the heavy corduroy curtains, drawn across the windows, swayed in the draft, or the house trembled in the blasts of the gale, she tilted her head as if listening. Gary, watching her, wondered what she could be thinking of—this old woman who had all the Christian virtues, yet who still believed in charms and spells and talked with the dead.

A violent gust of wind struck the house like a giant hand, and the ship's bell outside on the porch sounded a single stroke. Seenia sat up straight in her chair as if some one had called her, and made the sign of the cross. Fear was in her face, but there was also an un-

canny expectancy. Something in her manner drew every eye to her.

"Ah-a-a-a!" Her low tone was almost a whisper, and she held up one wrinkled hand. "My children, it is the East Wind—the Spirit Wind of Oo-koon!" There was a pause, filled with the crackling of the logs in the fireplace. "You will not believe old Seenia, but no other wind comes to ring the bell. . . . Some one travels swift—swift to Rocking Moon tonight!"

"Nonsense, Seenia," Colonel Jeff declared, leaning over and knocking the bowl of his pipe against the andiron. "There isn't a small boat on the Alaskan coast that would venture out on a night like this."

"Some one comes to Rocking Moon," the old woman repeated. And as if she paradoxically hoped for the thing she feared, Seenia placed a brown hand on either arm of her chair and turned her face to the doorway. Despite himself, Gary's eyes followed hers, a tingling sensation at the roots of his hair. He was aware also that Sasha was leaning forward looking expectantly at the Aleut.

"Seenia," she said, "perhaps tonight you can remember. Tell us again the story of the Cave of Oo-koon and the Mask of Jade. Seenia . . . you remember, don't you, the eyeless Mask of Jade? Gary has never heard you tell about it, Seenia."

The brown woman turned her head slowly until her deep, bright eyes rested on the cheechako. A moment she looked at him. Then she spoke.

"I am Christian . . . but I remember other times." She paused, her face taking on a look of abstraction as she gazed into the flickering flames. Gary felt that the room, the people were fading from her conscious-

ness while she threw a bridge across the years to the days of her youth. Then she began her tale in a low, half whispering voice that somehow carried clear above the combined stridor of wind and sea. She wove a spell that made it possible for him to follow her back into the pre-Russian days when her Hyperborean forefathers embalmed their dead and hung the fur-wrapped bodies of great hunters and whalers in the Cave of Ookoon. She made him see the dim, rocky tomb on stormy nights like this, when the mummies crawled from their wrappings and with masks on their sunken faces, held feasts and festivals, dancing about in skeleton glee to the whistling of the wind. She made him see the living hunters of those times performing the mystic rites of the whaling season, when they won the favor of departed ones by sending the most beautiful of the maidens into the Cave, to dance under the swinging mummies, maidens naked, except for the masks that came to their shoulders.

"Before the Russians—my mother is the most beauti-ful dancer," Seenia spoke slowly, her eyes on the past. "She tells me. She wears the Mask of Jade. It has no eyes. When she dances beneath the dead, she must see only her own feet through the holes,—so —" She pointed to her nostrils.

"The Russians come. Make all Aleuts Christians. Masks go. Dances go. Only the Mask of Jade is here. . . . Then—I lose it—the Mask of Jade." Her voice rose. "I lose it!" She passed her gnarled hand over her forehead and shook her head. "I pray. I am Christian. But I do not remember."

A mighty blast shook the house and the old woman turned her head in her weird, listening attitude. Sud-

denly it came to Gary that she, who when alone in her room had called on the spirits, was waiting for their message now. "Maybe so . . . maybe so . . . the spirits dance in the Cave of Oo-koon tonight," she whispered loudly. "My father the whaler. My mother the dancer. All—the—dead . . ." Her voice was lost in the wail of another woollie that swooped down on the cabin and shook it as a bear worries a newly caught salmon.

"All—the—dead——"

Everyone in the room was under the old Aleut's witch-like spell. Everyone was listening, even as she was listening. Again the bell outside sounded its single, dim stroke as if a spirit hand had touched it. Then Gary stiffened as if from an electric shock.

There had been no sound of footsteps on the porch, but someone—something—was knocking at the door!

OAKLAND
NOV 1923

CHAPTER IX

THE knocking was repeated with greater force. Before anyone could shake off the spell Seenia had unwittingly put upon them, the door opened violently. A damp gust of wind flattened the flame of the lamp. When the light flared up again Nicholas Nash was striding into the room.

His dripping black oilskins caught the flicker of the hearth-fire in fantastic zigzags of yellow light, lending him the look of some dark spirit of the storm. His eyes glowed beneath the rain-jeweled brim of his sou'-wester, and at the astonishment in the faces before him, he threw back his head and laughed, his teeth flashing in his wet face.

"Hello, everybody!" It delighted him to speak casually. "It's evident you didn't expect a call from me tonight!" He stamped his rubber boots, and shook himself, sending the water flying.

"By the lord, my boy!" bellowed the Colonel, finding voice at last. "I can hardly believe my eyes! Why —why—no boat can live in a storm like this!" He came hastily forward and began to help Nick off with his wet oilskins.

"It'll take something worse than this to drown the *Seal Pup*—when *I'm* at the wheel, Jeff." Nick slapped the Colonel on the shoulder, and there was a note of exultation in his voice that told how he gloried in his

successful battle with the tempest-tossed North Pacific. "But never mind the coats, Colonel Jeff." He turned toward the door where a rubber-clad man stood leaning against the panels, a suit-case in one hand. "Come here, Side-money. . . . Sasha—" his eyes rested for an uncertain moment on the girl's—"Sasha, can't we go upstairs and change our clothes?"

The mistress of Rocking Moon came forward in response to that first law of the North, the law of hospitality. "Why, of course, Nicolai. . . . Colonel Jeff, will you take them up to Dad's room? And Zoya, please, a fire in the kitchen and some hot food for them when they come down again." Perhaps it was the strange look in the half-breed girl's eyes that caused her to add: "I'll come out and help you in a moment."

Colonel Jeff led off toward the stairs. Nick, following, passed close to the chair of Seenia. The storm had provoked a diabolic activity in him. He leaned down and laughed into the old woman's face, his splendid, arrogant youth in poignant contrast with her age.

"Ah, Seenia," he said wickedly, harking back to boyhood days when he and Sasha had listened together to the Aleut's stories. "It's a night for a witch's brew, old girl. The Devil rides abroad on the backs of the breakers tonight—*and the spirits dance in the Cave of Oo-koon.* I know, for I've just come from there!" He laughed again, as the old woman, her eyes intent on the fire, made the sign of the cross. Seenia refused to grant him even a glance as he stamped off toward the hall followed by Side-money with the suit-case. Neither did she deign to notice the trader fifteen minutes later when he came down stairs in dry clothes and excellent spirits.

His hazard with sea and winds had cleared his mind of all irritability, all resentment against Sasha and the Northern world. After supper he left the table and dropped into an easy attitude, leaning against the mantel, smoking and making himself agreeable, as only he knew how. The urbanity of his Russian blood, combined with the wit of his Irish made him a delightful companion—when he considered his associates worthy of the effort. The Nicholas Nash of tonight was the Nash whom his friends in the States knew.

He was superbly sure of himself, silhouetted slim and tall with the leaping flames of the fire-place at his back. Zoya, from the concealing shadow of the kitchen door, paused often in her work to glance at him adoringly. Sasha, curled among the cushions of the couch, one end of which was occupied by Gary Tynan, turned her eyes thoughtfully from Nick to the cheechako as if comparing the two.

The trader told the news of Rezanoff: Mary Demetroff's prettiest creole daughter was married now to a wireless-station man at Kodiak. The *Starr* was expected from the South on her way to Bristol Bay. A prospector Nick had grubstaked had come back from the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes with his shoes burned off his feet.

Nick's statement that the Big Swede at Rezanoff had succumbed to a batch of his own *macoola* and was under the doctor's care, set the three men off on a spirituous discourse. The potency of *macoola* versus other brands of home brew was discussed. This subject ended when Side-money, silent until then, threw the weight of his evidence to the support of "white mule." Two drinks of this, he said, taken one night

when he was performing his duties as night-watchman aboard one of the Alaska Packers' ships moored off San Francisco, had enabled him to see polar bears on icebergs, floating all about him in San Francisco Bay.

The house shook again in the grasp of the storm, and Nick brought the company back to the present. He told how the *Seal Pup* had scudded before the wind from Oo-koon over combers that threatened to break over the stern every moment, and contrasted this Alaskan gale with one he had known on a mud-buried road in France. The roaring of the sea in the caves about the base of Oo-koon tonight, he said, was like the crash of heavy artillery.

"Why in time you ever picked on that island to locate your fox-farm, my boy, I don't see," remarked Colonel Jeff, his hands tenderly assisting one of his rheumatically inclined legs to cross over the other.

"I'm beginning to wonder myself," answered Nick, with a peculiar smile. "I can't get a native to go near the place—though I thought all that old superstition had died out—" He slanted an eye toward Seenia, sitting stolidly in her chair. "Even Feodor, whom I questioned about it, said he wouldn't live there for love nor money, on account of the mummies. . . . Of course it's ridiculous—all this Aleut foolishness about the Cave, but it forces me, you see, to employ only outside help. I've got two men over there now." He laughed. "Why, we're using the Cave of Oo-koon to store our provisions and fox food in," he added, looking again at Seenia, as if he wanted her to realize the white man's contempt for and defiance of her tribal superstitions.

But Seenia sat in Buddhistic calm. Not even the

tap of the ship's bell outside caused her to move now.

Gary Tynan had been silent for some time, though his gaze had an analytical quality as he studied first one and then another of the group about the fire. Now he expressed an interest in the ranch on Oo-koon, asking Nick about the location of the historic Cave, and the trader's plans for carrying on the industry.

Nick adroitly managed to give him very little information.

"Of course we don't allow visitors on the Island, Tynan," he concluded. "But some day before you go South, I'll take you over there and show you around myself. Let's see, the *Starr* is due back here from Bristol Bay in about two weeks. You'll be taking passage on her, won't you?"

Gary assented. An extra heavy gust of wind tore at the corners of the house and the window hangings stirred in the draft.

"Br-r-r-r!" shivered the Colonel, rising from his chair, and emptying the bowl of his pipe into the fireplace. "Folks, I think we'd all better turn in. D'you want me to go down with you to the float, Gary, and see how the *Simmie and Ann* is resting this wild night?"

"No, thanks, Colonel. I'll run down by myself and take a look at her—and at the *Pup,* too, Nash."

Gary passed into the back hall to put on his oilskins, while the other members of the household went to their rooms.

The storm raged unabated all that night and the next day, making it impossible for any boat to leave the Island. Even in the sheltered bay the float and the moored launches, bobbing up and down, were dimmed

by flying spray. Nicholas Nash continued to make himself agreeable and useful. He spent a few of the morning hours in the barn advising the Colonel of a new treatment that might grow hair on the nude Sampson. He took a turn stirring the great kettle of food which Gary was cooking for the foxes. He set his man Side-money to cutting wood in the shed, while he himself carried it into the kitchen where Zoya, in a spotless pink apron, was moulding loaves of bread, her rounded, tawny arms powdered with flour.

During the afternoon he came in from the barn to find Sasha alone in the living-room trying to wind a skein of yellow yarn. He had made no attempt to see her alone before. She had played hostess to him well, but without that bantering gaiety which had formerly characterized her comradeship with him. Perhaps he missed those teasing ways of which he had complained on the Lookout that day. Perhaps the girl's cool politeness made him value more the warm friendliness of other times. At any rate his face was serious and there was a certain deference in his manner as he stood before her.

"I'd like to help you wind it, Sasha, if you'll let me," he said, tentatively picking up a strand of yarn with his thumb and forefinger.

She assented casually. As he sat opposite her, holding the yellow skein clumsily on his arms, he talked of her father and his work, a subject of which he knew the girl never tired. Yet even this did not lessen the constraint between them.

Half the yarn was wound when Nick, with his usual disregard of consequences, let both arms fall.

"Oh, Sasha," he groaned. "I can't stand this any

longer! Hit me. Kick me. Do anything to me, but don't be so darned polite to me. . . . I realize I made a fool of myself— I don't know what got into me that day on the Lookout—" He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his face in his hands, the yellow yarn tangling unheeded about his feet. Penitent dejection was in his attitude. A moment later he looked up from his cupped palms. "I'm sorry, Sasha," he said simply. "I won't do it any more."

There was a boyish naïveté in his expression which had won him many a reprieve in his childhood days. Perhaps he knew it was not without its effect now, for he watched the girl a moment, then impulsively held out his hand. "Shake hands with me, Sasha, and give me another trial, won't you?"

It was not Nicholas Nash, champion of the ways of the South, who spoke, but Nicolai the Alaskan. Sasha slowly reached out and clasped his fingers.

"Oh, Nicolai, I——"

The sentence ended abruptly as Gary Tynan entered from the back hall, a firelog on his shoulder. She withdrew her hand and rose, gathering up the yarn with her usual calmness, though her face went pink.

"Will you move, please, Nick, and make room for Gary with the wood," she directed.

The trader scowled and gave his chair an irritated yank across the floor. There was no trace of his former boyish expression in the look he shot at the cheechako who had interrupted him.

"Well, upon my word, Tynan," he said, a scornful twist to his lips, "you make an exceptional hired man— especially when it comes to attending to the needs of this particular room. I'm sure Sasha will be sorry

to lose you." Something in his tone charged the atmosphere with tenseness.

Gary said nothing, though the line of his jaw grew set.

"By the way," Nick continued, reaching into his pocket for his cigarettes, "shall I reserve your passage for the down-trip of the *Starr,* Tynan?"

Gary placed the log on the fire to his satisfaction, taking longer than usual. Then he straightened, and while brushing his hands together he looked the trader up and down impersonally. "No thanks, old man," he spoke quietly. "*I* always attend strictly to my own business."

The two young men stood plumbing the depths of each other's eyes until Sasha stepped hurriedly in between them, slipping the yarn once more over Nick's hands.

"Come, Nicolai. You must finish the work you began," she interrupted, shoving him toward a chair.

Gary walked out of the room, while the trader looked after him, the yarn dangling unheeded from his arms.

"There's something about that fellow I don't like, Sasha!" he burst out. "I think Colonel Jeff was a bit too hasty in hiring him. I'm not knocking him, you understand, but I'm just thinking of your interest."

"Why, Gary has been splendid!" the girl defended quickly. "Alexander and Seenia just adore him, and all the rest of us like him, too."

"Yes?" He slipped one arm free of the yellow yarn, lighted a cigarette and turned to toss the burned match into the fire-place, thereby concealing the sudden flare of jealousy in his eyes. "You know he's a stranger in this part of the country. He landed here looking like

a tramp, from where no one knows. What his business has been is a mystery, too, but it wasn't manual labor, that's a cinch. He's got hands like a woman. In these days of fox-poaching, Sasha, you can't be too careful, that's all."

"He told me he'd been mining in Siberia, Nicolai, and he showed me a scar on his head he got there in a skirmish!"

"Huh! He was making a bid for sympathy."

"But he wasn't making a bid for sympathy when he jumped overboard to save Feodor, Nick! And he never asked to be left behind at Rezanoff, you must admit that!"

"Oh, well!" Nick tossed the yarn to a chair. "Have it your own way, then. No doubt the man's all right," he conceded. "Anyway, there's no use trying to tell you anything. You don't know any more about the ways of the world than a baby, Sasha. And you'll never learn anything, either, until you go Outside and see something of life. . . . Sasha—" he looked down into her face, heart-shaped, big-eyed in the dim afternoon light, desire struggling with the better judgment that at last plunged his hands into his pockets, lest they touch her. He could not afford to make another mistake such as that he had made on the Lookout. And yet he was in one of his moods when Sasha Larianoff appealed to him most. Sasha, so young and fresh with her bright hair making golden shadows on the cream of her neck. Sasha would be exquisite to love. Unsullied and fine with the delicate, subtle attractiveness of a nature attuned to beauty. He thought he never would tire of her, as he did of other women. Therefore he was going to marry her. He must be the first to

bring the radiant look of love to her face, the englamoured light to her eyes. He contrasted her enchanting, illusive little ways with those of other women he had known, worldly women of the States who had once intoxicated the young man from Alaska with their calculated emotion-arousing arts. But his thraldom had been brief. He learned quickly and because of a certain ruthless, dominant masculinity, he could go his way in love now with capable insolence. Many women liked his cave-man methods, but Sasha, to whom love was a closed book, was different. Sasha must be won —not taken. Yet, though he despised a quick surrender, he had no patience, nor time for a long wooing of the woman who should be his wife. And now another man had entered his domain. He had not realized that day of Feodor's accident in Rezanoff that the bearded Tynan was so young and good-looking. Otherwise he would have seen to it that Feodor's substitute now was Side-money.

"Sasha," he repeated. "You're such a darned, sweet, pugnacious little thing. You need someone to look after you. . . . Women like you were meant for love and protection—and not for business. Let me——"

"Now, now, Nicolai!" She held up a warning finger. "Not another word! Besides, I must run upstairs and see if Seenia has finished her nap. It's nearly supper time. If you like, you may help Zoya set the table, or you may play on the piano one of those jazzy tunes you like so well when you are in the United States." With a wave of her hand she disappeared in the shadows of the back hall.

Towards evening the rain ceased, and the wind began to die down, though the noise of the turbulent

sea outside the Island seeped into the living-room like sounds heard when a shell is pressed against the ear. After supper the Colonel was enjoying his smoke, making plans for the morrow, while Gary, seated on the floor, was coaxing Alexander to bring him his coat.

"Bring me my coat, Alex. Bring it here, boy. Bring me my coat!"

The fox nipped at the garment lying at the farther end of the room. Then he dropped it, looking up with his head at an inquiring angle, one foot raised.

"Come a-running! Right this way, Alex!" Gary patted his knee encouragingly. "Come a-running!" Once more the animal took hold of the coat, played with it a moment, and then dragged it, with many halts, along the floor until he dropped it by the side of the young man.

"Good old fellow!" Alexander placed both little forefeet on Gary's chest and muzzled an affectionate nose against his neck.

"You blessed old fraud!" He laughed, throwing his arm about the fox. "You know you'll get your reward, don't you?"

Alexander's yellow eyes watched intently as Gary lifted a browned leg of duck from its wrapping of paper napkin, and he was on the alert to catch it in his mouth when it was tossed to him.

"Great Mahogany Ghost!" roared the Colonel. "Wake up, Gary! I've been talking to you for the last five minutes and you haven't heard. Drat the fellow," he went on. "He's got the ranch like a sideshow, with his performing foxes, and his trained seagulls, and such."

"What's the trouble, Colonel?"

"I said you ought to take the *Simmie and Ann* over to Rezanoff tomorrow for the mail. The *Starr* is due from the South today, but the storm has delayed her, probably."

"Oh, certainly, Colonel Jeff." Gary came to his feet and found a chair. "I'll have to stay there all night anyway, and have that crank-shaft attended to. The *Simmie's* engine is getting too temperamental."

"That will make it just right for Zoya," exclaimed Sasha. "She wants to go in to town to see her mother. Now she can stay over night, too."

Nick had been rather silent since supper. He sat outside the light of the lamp in the shadows on the piano stool, his long legs out in front of him, his elbow on the keyboard. His gaze shifted back and forth from Sasha, knitting a yellow scarf in the glow of the fire, to the newcomer. Only once did he look at Zoya. That was when the creole's visit to Rezanoff was mentioned.

Finally he turned to the instrument and sat in a preliminary mood of abstraction, his long, brown hands on the keys. When he began to play it was softly, meditatively, as if he would not disturb the conversation of the others. The color, contrast and rhythm were such as come only to those unfettered musical ones who play by ear. In his improvisation were hints of his days spent in civilization—days he clothed now in the glamour that time and distance lend. Through the medley wandered a plaintive theme from *Madam Butterfly*, weird muffled bits from *Peer Gynt*, a strain from one of Hope's *Indian Love Lyrics*.

Gradually as he created an atmosphere, the conversation back of him ceased. When all were listening he began to sing in a voice that was low, but vibrant and

masculine. The other men in the room knew, if Sasha did not, that Nicholas Nash was singing to her.

" 'If all the world were a violin
And the four winds were the strings,
With love for a bow, I would make you know
What my heart sings.
The North would be loud, the East would be keen,
And the West like a passion driven;
But the sweet, warm South——' "

The words ceased, as if he had suddenly checked himself in a declaration of love. But he continued to play. Presently he drifted from a succession of chords, half-barbarian in their muted rhythm, into a saga of the North, a simple, chanting song of a white man setting forth in winter over the frozen whiteness of Bering Strait toward the magnetic radiance of the Northern Lights. A song of the Siberian coast and what the man found there—freedom among the lawless and forgetfulness of the world in the primitive, dangerous love of an Arctic queen. He made his listeners feel the restlessness of the wandering spirit, the contempt for safety, for comfort, the chafing at confining restrictions that started the adventurer on his way.

Sasha, who had ignored his first song, applauded the last one. She crossed the room to get something from the dining-table, and paused before the piano.

"Ah, Nicolai," she smiled at him. "That was splendid! You, who think you are civilized just because you have been so often to the States, you really love the North, Nick. It is the North that will claim you in the end."

Half an hour later Nicholas Nash and the girl sat before the dying fire alone. The others had gone to bed. Sasha had been talking of her foxes—the number she would sell in December. "I've been wonderfully successful, Nick, and I can pay you every cent I owe you," she concluded.

"I'd rather you'd marry me, Sasha, and then you wouldn't owe me a cent. It would all be in the family then, you see."

"Now, Nick, let's not talk of that again."

"But I *must* talk of it! That's all I can think of lately, and I want to get it settled——"

"It is settled, Nicolai." The girl rose to her feet. "Please don't mention it any more. Besides, it's time to go to bed. I've still to make out a list of the things I want Gary to——"

"'Gary! Gary!'" Nick mocked bitterly, jerking himself upright with a gesture of impatience. "That's all I can hear from you now. It seems to me you have become rather chummy with the fellow to be calling him by his first name on such short notice. . . . Look here, Sasha! Let me leave you my man Side-money, to look out for things until Feodor gets around again. Let this cheechako go. He——"

At the look on the girl's face he checked himself. "No," she replied quietly but firmly, as she gathered up her knitting. "Your interest is appreciated, Nicolai, but I am capable of managing my own affairs."

For one indeterminate moment Nick visibly struggled with himself as he looked down on Sasha. Then he swung sullenly on his heel and started for the back hall that led to the stairway.

"Very well. Have it your own way. Perhaps—the

time will come when you'll be glad to have me help you manage your affairs," he added ominously.

He paused, giving her an opportunity to retract her words. When she did not, he ascended the stairway slowly, stopping midway and looking back toward the living-room. Then he gave his head an angry shake and went on quickly to the top, where an uncurtained window framed a bit of the night. He stared with unseeing eyes at the inked-in tops of trees against a sky where flying clouds trailed themselves across the stars. The comfortable snoring of Colonel Jeff filled the quiet.

He turned down the hall where a night-lamp glowed faintly on its bracket, then slackened his footsteps. The door of Seenia's room was opening. Into the dim light stepped Zoya, in an ivory-tinted kimona, tall and slim and beautiful as a tawny queen. Her thick ebon hair, unbound, marked off the oval of her face and fell to her knees.

For a moment the two stood looking into each other's eyes. Then as the needle to the magnet Zoya walked toward Nash. Caution, indecision succeeded one another in his manner. But when she reached him he gathered her into his arms with reckless desire.

Neither of them knew that Gary Tynan, coming in from the float, stood watching at the head of the stairs for one astonished, spell-bound second, before he softly retraced his steps. Neither of them knew that he went out to the beach and walked there for an hour in the dark, before venturing back to the house to go to bed.

CHAPTER X

MORNING lifted out of the storm, flooding the world with sunshine that had in it an exhilarating hint of fall. The air was vitalizing with the clear, pure ozonic vigor of the North. Blackbirds rollicked in the tree-tops and cut joyous black lines against the sky. Seagulls soared and skirled and screeled in ecstasy. Foxes scampered along the sands, stopping now and then to hop, stiff-legged, about each other in sheer animal happiness.

Down at the float Gary responded, like the wild things, to the stimulus of the hour. As he made the *Simmie and Ann* ready for the short journey to Rezanoff he felt—and was fully aware of the delightful incongruity of the feeling—like a young Viking starting out on adventure when there was yet the lure of countries undiscovered. He was just beginning to realize that the greatest wonder of Alaska is the consciousness of youth that it brings to those who dwell there. Even the Colonel, he knew, was feeling it this morning, as he stepped jauntily along, Zoya's bag in one hand, his cane swinging in the other, and a spike of lupine stuck behind his ear.

He helped Zoya aboard with old-fashioned gallantry. As the launch shot away from the float and Gary gave

the whistle three playful toots, Colonel Jeff waved his cane in vigorous farewell.

The *Simmie and Ann* rounded Lookout Point and the prow dipped to a smooth ground-swell, leaving a purple wake across the oily silver of the sea. Gary thrust his head out of the wheel-house window to wave at Sasha, fluttering her handkerchief from the Lookout tower high above them. He was the happier for knowing that she had not waited down at the float while Nick and Side-money made ready the *Seal Pup* for departure.

An unmanageable strand of dark hair tumbled down over his eyes, and he shook it back as he stepped to the wheel again and gave it a turn.

"'Mo-o-r—or—ning w-a-i-t-s at the end of the w-o-r-l-d
And the w-o-r-l-d is all at our f-e-e-t!'"

he caroled in a very bad tenor voice.

"How's that for warbling, Zoya?" he called, with a grin that acknowledged his own vocal shortcomings.

The creole girl, standing in the bow of the boat, turned to him with a shy smile that might have meant anything. "Didn't you ever hear of the *Gypsy Trail?*" he continued. "No? You look like a gypsy queen yourself, this morning, in that wine-colored shawl."

He hummed a few more bars of the song:

"'Follow the Romany patteran
West to the Sinking Sun,
Till the junk-sails lift through the houseless drift
And the East and the West are one,'"

he sang. "You know, Zoya, if we kept heading this way out along the Aleutian Islands it wouldn't be long before we'd arrive at the place where the East and the West are one—in point of longitude at least. Rather thrilling idea, that. Don't you think?"

The girl nodded her head and pointed westward. "Yes. Out along there," she volunteered, "the natives call them the Isles of the Sinking Sun."

Her vivid shawl stirred in the breeze. The sunshine falling on her bare head brought out the iridescent shades in her thick, black hair and lent a golden tinge to her skin. Gary's eyes rested on her in frank, impersonal delight. She was superb, this dusky beauty of the North! Yet there was about her also that hint of pathos which seems the heritage of those who are only half white. She stimulated his imagination today. Half-formed phrases came to him. Sentences from Seenia's tales began to group themselves about his thought of this girl. Half white! Idols of wood! Moonlight dances before the mouths of caves! The Mummy Cave of Oo-koon! *The Mask of Jade!*

He nearly shouted. For the first time in many sterile months, he felt in his mind the stir of literary creation. A story was germinating. He tried desperately to grasp it—to hold it—then groaned. It was gone. The precious thing had vanished in a flash, as it had come. Only the phrases remained, empty, meaningless. Yet—in a dim way he knew that the thing would come again. He felt sure of it.

He looked up at Zoya. She had turned facing the wheel-house, her hands holding her shawl under her chin; but her eager dark eyes were fixed on something astern.

In another instant Gary heard the *Seal Pup* slugging the cliffs with blasts from its unmuffled exhaust. The sounds grew louder and in a few minutes the *Pup* snorted alongside—shot by—went on ahead.

Almost immediately Gary swore. Nash, with the fastest launch on the coast, was doing that thing which maddens even the most phlegmatic boatman—doing it with insolent deliberateness.

He was running circles around the plodding little *Simmie and Ann!*

Gary went through all the stages of emotion from the first overwhelming helpless rage at the *Simmie's* lack of speed, with the attendant primitive urge to do battle with the owner of the *Pup,* to the last stage when a saving sense of humor came to temper the situation. When the *Seal Pup* was snorting derisively by for the third time, the cheechako was able to thrust his dark head out of the wheel-house window and achieve a casual wave of the hand as he gave Nash a good-natured, careless hail. The trader's interest in the one-sided sport ceased at once, and he headed for Rezanoff, quickly leaving the slower boat behind.

When the *Simmie and Ann* reached the village dock, the *Pup* was one of a dozen launches moored there.

It was steamer-day, the most important day of the month at Rezanoff, and there was an air of bustle and gaiety about the village. The flag swung lazily from the staff that topped the Governor's House. Men and women moved along paths that criss-crossed the knolls between dwellings. The dock near the trading-post was alive with natives, white men, creole girls and babies. There were yelpings of fighting dogs, the blare of phonographs, and the calls of launchmen. One

of the herring-scows had just disgorged a load of fish kept too long for salting, and as the silvery mass sank in the green depths below, hundreds of argus-eyed gulls came swooping to the spot, their hungry cries adding to the din.

Zoya left the launch and hurried home to her mother, while Gary made his way through the crowd to the post-office, which occupied one corner of Nash's store. The great, long room was filled with fishermen, townspeople and merchandise, and the light from the deep-silled windows was dimmed by articles of trade hanging near them. Mingled smells of fish, fruit, and vegetables were shot through by the penetrating odor of new overalls. Sacks of sugar and gunnies of flour lay piled up in the middle of the floor. A long counter held hardware, blankets and bundles of *beleek*—the dried salmon which natives and white men alike find invaluable on the trail. Before the single show-case, containing candy, cold-cream, perfume and other things for the feminine trade, stood a group of creole and Aleut girls from the herring-packing plant and the cannery near the village. They were dressed in their Sunday best, clean pinks, blues and yellows setting off their dark faces. When Gary entered, they laughed softly and nudged each other—their tribute to a young and good-looking white man.

As he dropped his mail in the slot, the crowd about the doorway began to move and Nicholas Nash pushed his way through. There was recklessness in the jaunty angle of his cap, and, as he came, he slapped this one and that one on the shoulder with hearty greetings. Gary marveled at the unusual geniality of the man until he saw a launchman nod wisely to his mate and heard:

"Nash has started to tank up again on *macoola*. I'll bet they rip the town wide open tonight, with Father Anton away."

Nick had gone to the back of the store and mounted a chair. His lean vivid face was flushed as it rose above the crowd. He removed his cap with an exaggerated flourish and held it aloft to catch the attention of the others.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He spoke with a superb assumption of democracy. Only Gary, watching quietly on the outskirts of the crowd, caught the note of condescension in his voice, a note which told the observant listener that Nicholas Nash knew himself to be vastly superior to this hoi polloi.

"Ladies and gentlemen! They tell me that the roof blew off the dance-hall during the storm while I was gone, and so you can't have the usual boat-night dance this evening." He brought his cap down against his chest. "I just want to tell you, folks, that you needn't let that worry you one little bit. I'll turn my place over to you tonight, and you all can dance in the old ballroom of the Governor's House!"

He was interrupted by a scattered cheer, and yells of approval. The dance on every steamer-day was an event looked forward to by all Rezanoff and the surrounding country during the fishing season. The season was at its close. The *Starr* on her southward trip would take away what was left of the cannery crews. Nash's news was particularly welcome to those young men who had planned to have one last fling before leaving for the South. After the trader's announcement, business in the store increased two-fold. The two clerks behind the counter were kept busy

serving the girls with powder and perfume, and the men with shirts and ties.

Gary watched the activity for a few minutes, a good-natured light in his gray eyes. It was good to see a crowd again and listen to the comical gibes and slangy persiflage of the men.

When he went up to the hotel where he was to spend the night, he found Zoya in tears, trying to coax her unwilling mother into granting permission to attend the dance. Because the affair was to be at Nicholas Nash's house, the girl's parent objected. Gary was drawn into the argument by the weeping Zoya, and a few minutes later, to his utter astonishment, he found the girl winning the coveted permission by advancing him as an escort—and a guarantee of respectability. Going about his business during the day he gave some thought to the artifices of women.

The night was luminous with the radiance of stars as he and the creole girl set out down the wide, white road toward the house of Nicholas Nash. All about them the cool, friendly dusk was spangled with the home-lights on knolls and in the hollows. Voices called and answered; occasional strains of song sounded as couples strolled over the downs toward the orange rectangles that marked the windows of the Governor's House.

The Iron Catherine, as if remembering those nights of splendor and gaiety in her own Russian court, looked quizzically down from her pedestal on the gable roof at the knots of young men in the careless holiday garb of fishermen and cannery employees. They stood about on the green in front of the wide veranda, smoking, talking, practicing dance steps to their own humming.

From within came the murmur of voices and an occasional preparatory strumming of guitars, or the tinkle of a mandolin.

Gary left Zoya at the door of a small, temporary dressing-room, where young mothers were making determined and apparently ineffectual efforts to get their offspring to sleep before the dance began. He walked into the large, low-ceilinged room which had been the gathering-place of Russian officers and noblemen in Rezanoff's many-colored past.

On the natural wood of the old walls, now toned to deep amber, shiny new lamps of the cheap bracket variety had been hooked over nails hastily driven. Two Aleut boys were shaving candles, letting the wax fall on the floor as they walked about. At the head of the room sat the creole musicians, brown-faced, black-eyed and remarkably like Hawaiians in appearance. This resemblance was heightened by the instruments they held, for the Rezanoff orchestra was composed of two mandolins and three guitars.

Along two walls were ordinary wooden benches, now almost filled with girls and women in dresses rivaling the colors of the rainbow. The full-blooded Aleuts sat nearest the door, while the creoles occupied the benches nearer the musicians. It seemed almost as if Nick Nash's guests had consciously graded themselves according to color.

There was not a white woman in the house.

For a moment Gary was surprised at the pretty, modish gowns the creoles wore; then he remembered that feminine Rezanoff ordered its clothing through catalogues from New York's great mail-order houses.

Many of the girls were willowy creatures, with

creamy-tinted faces, languorous dark eyes, and crowns of black hair.

Gary looked up to see Zoya standing in the doorway of the dressing-room. Her dusky eyes glowed beneath the piled-up ebon softness of her hair. Her full mouth was scarlet against the tawny ivory of her face, and her bare neck and arms but added a deeper tone to the tea-rose color of the gown she wore—a simple, straight-hanging garment of fine wool. He smothered an exclamation of admiration and started over to her, just as the musicians began playing for the first dance.

Dodging between the couples, he collided violently with Nicholas Nash, bound for the same goal. There was a smoldering look in the trader's eyes and the aroma of *macoola* on his breath. This last, perhaps, accounted for the fact that here, among the khaki-clad fishermen, launchmen and cannery-employees, Nash appeared attired in a dinner jacket—the first that Rezanoff had ever seen. The black and white set off his lean blondness, and there was no doubt of the havoc he was creating in feminine hearts. The eyes of every woman present followed him admiringly, longingly.

As Gary started to lead Zoya away, Nash put out a proprietary hand and scowled.

"Isn't this our dance, Zoya?" he demanded arrogantly, and for an instant the twin devils of jealousy and distrust looked out of his eyes.

Assent was in Zoya's face, but Gary drew her firmly out on the floor.

"You're out of luck, Nash," he said, and though his voice was good-natured, the muscles about his jaw tensed slightly. "I brought her here tonight, you know." Cheechako though he was, he knew that Nash,

no matter what his private interest in Zoya might be, would never publicly compromise himself by escorting the half-breed to a dance.

But he surrendered the girl to the trader when the music stopped, and stood leaning against the wall near the doorway where the spectators congregated to watch and comment on the dancers.

The creoles' reputation for dancing was merited. They had a certain wild grace, a peculiar rhythm of movement that Gary had never seen before. And they attended strictly to the business of the moment. There were no conversations between couples. Men and women gave themselves up entirely to the sensation of motion. At first all the steps were modern ones brought direct from San Francisco and Seattle each summer by the younger cannerymen, but the creole musicians, playing by ear and instinct the syncopations learned from phonograph records, infused into the stringed music sensuous retardations and languorous variations of broken minors that made of the most familiar jazz selection something primordial, curiously stirring, intoxicating.

Nick Nash and Zoya danced together as if they had been made for one another, their blond and ebon heads close. Supple, slender, their bodies swayed and glided in perfect accord. Nash claimed the girl afterward for every alternate dance.

As Gary watched, the comments of the men about him began to penetrate his absorption. The attitude he found prevalent among the "summer sourdoughs," those men of the younger, flippant generation who came up from the States for the summer, was in marked contrast to the chivalry of the North, of which

so much has been written. They were glad, eager to take their fun with the pretty creole girls of the village, yet, like a thread of yellow through the fabric of their conversations, ran a contempt for the hapless children of mixed blood.

"But them little half-breeds look mighty purty tonight—purty as any white woman I ever see," defended an old-timer.

"Yah—but they get lummie-eyed like all the squaws when they get old," spoke up a wise, pimply-faced youth from Seattle.

"Yes, boys, and when the sweat begins to run, they all smell like fish." This last remark was the contribution of Nicholas Nash, as he passed through on his way to the kitchen.

A sudden overwhelming disgust for the men about him swept over Gary. He saw that Zoya was, for the moment, alone between dances, and he crossed over to her bench, determined to take her home to her mother, immediately.

"Wouldn't you like me to take you back to the hotel now, Zoya?" he suggested gently, endeavoring to be diplomatic.

"Oh, no! No, Garee!" The girl's eyes were sparkling with excitement and happiness. "I want to stay much, *much* longer!"

The young man looked helplessly about him. He was convinced that he should take Zoya away from the dance, still he could not force her to go with him. As a chaperon in Alaska he was absolutely uncertain of himself. He was debating as to his course of action when an Aleut boy come hurrying toward him.

Gary learned a moment later that some befuddled

fisherman, in making a landing with his launch at the dock, had cast off the line of the *Simmie and Ann,* and Sasha Larianoff's launch was drifting out on the tide. With a word of explanation to his charge, he turned and left the building, and a few minutes later was out in the fresh, star-lit dusk covering the distance to the dock as fast as his long legs could carry him.

On the heels of Gary's departure someone announced an old-fashioned Russian quadrille. The creole men, who had hitherto given up the floor to the whites, let out a whooping cheer and rushed for partners. The atmosphere of the place changed instantly. "To your places, now, boys and girls! One more couple! One more couple here!" the floor manager kept yelling. Those in sets already formed step-danced and shoved each other about playfully while waiting for the floor to fill up. At the command: "Let her go, Professor!" the music and the thump of feet struck up simultaneously, and the fun was on.

The creoles infused into their dancing some of the abandon which characterized those stirring and vociferous old-time orgies told of by the early traders along the Aleutians. Half-way through, many of the men jerked off their coats, tossing them to the benches, and began interposing their steps with astonishing side-shuffles, showing their white teeth in grotesque grimaces and delighted grins. Others, awaiting the word of the caller, stood in half-crouching positions, dancing from the waist up, with arms, torso and head. They all broke out every now and then into a short, chanting refrain, punctuated with whoops.

The interpolation of these savage bits from the for-

bidden dances of the past produced an instant emotional response in the women. Then the white men became infected with the spirit of the moment. The square dance ended in a thunder of applause, shouts of laughter and much perspiration.

Another quadrille followed, and another, while the yelling and chanting increased. Soon no one thought of dancing anything else. No one wanted anything else. The music became a series of monotonous, resonant chords, with a stirring rhythm, but no melody. An old Aleut woman shuffled in with a shallow native drum, and squatting beside the musicians in toothless glee, she drew out a hollow, thrilling boom with her fist. Nick produced a pair of castanets made of sea-parrot beaks and tossed them to a crippled boy, who added another primitive note to the thumping orchestra.

Soon it became whispered about that the trader was serving *macoola* in the kitchen, and the end of each dance was marked by an exodus. Though none of the girls drank the stuff, their spirits, stimulated by the dancing, kept pace with those of the men. Nick danced continually with Zoya and their daring interpretations won the frequent applause of the others.

To the sparkling-eyed creole this night was a social triumph. Never before had she been free to dance without being aware of the kindly, though supervising eye of Father Anton, or the sterner, more critical regard of her religious mother. She was intoxicated with her freedom, and the undivided attention of Nicholas Nash. Life for her tonight was at its flood.

In the midst of the revelry the trader bent his flushed face and whispered to her. She waited a moment, as if considering, then answered with a nod.

The next quadrille was forming with the usual shouting and laughter, when she slipped through a door that led into a hall, and ran rapidly up the stairs at the end of it.

Nash's living quarters were at the top. She knew he was still below with his guests. She opened the door cautiously and stepped into the large, warm, dusky room, where a faint odor of expensive cigarettes hung in the air. A clock ticked loudly as if protesting at her intrusion. She bumped into two wide, overstuffed chairs before her eyes became accustomed to the shadowiness. Her slow-moving feet sank into the deep fur of bear rugs as she advanced. On a table a low-turned, shaded lamp shed a dim light over a medley of sporting and motor-boat magazines and smoking materials. Flames from the fireplace, quiet, fitful, made magic over the low couch before it, changing the rounded surfaces of velour cushions into soft, wild creatures that nuzzled and snuggled each other. The firelight wavered over the piano's pale, waiting keys; caught the metal on the rack of guns above it, and made high lights on the heavy tan velour curtains drawn over the windows. Beneath mounted heads of moose and mountain sheep a small gallery of pictures spotted the wall. They were all framed photographs of speedboats and women.

Zoya reached timidly over and turned up the wick of the lamp, her dark eyes moving about the room wonderingly, lovingly. With a sudden catch of the breath, she pressed one hand against her throat; then her face took on an expression that had in it a touch of superstitious fear, a hint of remorse. She was looking up at the golden icon of St. Nicholas—a gift symbolic of a

Russian mother's faith in the protecting power of her son's name-saint.

The girl, trained in the household of a priest, walked slowly to the corner, and stood for a moment studying the kindly painted face, the upraised, cautionary hand. Then a shake of her head gave a negative answer to the mute pleading she saw there. She stepped back, caught up a scarf from the back of a chair, and mounting a stool, carefully covered the eyes of the holy picture.

CHAPTER XI

ZOYA was putting the final touch to the scarf over the icon when the door opened and Nicholas Nash's amused laugh sounded behind her. Startled, she turned, holding out her hands to balance herself as she looked down into his face. Before she could say a word he had caught her about the knees and with rough playfulness had set her down among the cushions of the couch.

"There, my little savage!" He laughed again. "You let that saintly old boy alone—d'you hear?" He straightened, balancing himself on widespread feet. "You let him alone, Zoya, and attend strictly to *this* little Saint Nicholas!" He tapped himself on the chest with an alcoholic air of vast importance.

Even in the compelling presence of her lover, Zoya paid the teachings of Father Anton tribute in the fleeting look she gave the covered icon. But, though she sighed as she turned from it, a second later, when she rose from the couch, the face she lifted to Nash was smiling, radiant.

"You make me for-get ever-ry thing, Nicolai!" Her quaintly accented English came slowly as she shook her dark head. "Always—you make me for-get ever-ry thing but you." She raised her slim, brown hands until they rested one on either side of his blond head.

"You are so beau-ti-ful, Nicolai." There was awe in her voice. For a moment she loved as children love. Her fingers slipped downward, following the contour of his shoulders, his arms. "So beau-ti-ful—so white, in these black clothes from the United States!" She took his hand and kissed it, then laid her cheek against it. "Nicolai," she said, softly, coaxingly, as if she had asked the question many times before; "when are you going to take me to see those great cities of the South? When are you going to—marry me?"

Nick's mood changed instantly. He stiffened and shoved her away from him. "Now, look here, Zoya—" His mouth and eyes were tensed with irritation, and his tone petulant, "—Look here, I *told* you not to talk about that any more, didn't I? I told you I'd changed my mind about that. . . . *Didn't I?"* A frown drew his light, finely drawn eyebrows together.

The creole shrank back a step. Then, with a quick movement she reached over and caught him by the shoulders. Troubled, frightened, she sought to compel his shifting eyes. Her chin quivered. "But . . . in the beginning—" she whispered. "In the beginning —Oh, Nicolai, you said——"

He shrugged and turned his face from her. "In the beginning—Oh, damn it! You women are always going back to the beginning! Well—I suppose I did say some fool things, but—what the devil— A man can't always think the same thing. You know that, Zoya. . . . Come—be reasonable now. . . . Zoya, look here—" as the girl's arms fell from him and her head sank dispiritedly. "Aw-w, look here, honey. Don't begin to cry now. I've told you how it is. A man in my position——"

"Is it Sasha, Nicolai? It is Sasha that you love better than me?"

"Sasha! Good Lord!" The irritation came back into his voice. "How often must I tell you to leave Sasha out of this entirely. I refuse to discuss Sasha with *you*. She—she regards me as so much driftwood, anyway, since that—that mealy-mouthed cheechako came. And look here, Zoya—" Blusteringly he seized upon this point to divert her from the other subject and put her on the defensive. "What do you mean by letting that fellow bring you here tonight, huh? What's he always butting in on my affairs for? I——"

He checked himself when he saw the girl was not listening. She stood quietly, but it was the ominous, pregnant quiet of the Indian. Her eyes were fixed on the framed photographs of women smiling from the wall near her.

"If you don't love Sasha, then it is one of *those* white women you love!" Her pointing finger trembled.

Nick's short, sardonic laugh sounded as he realized that she did not recognize the famous beauties of the screen whose pictures had once captivated his fancy.

"Perhaps—I do. And—perhaps I don't," he answered equivocally, turning to take a bottle from the mantel.

With an elaborate gesture born of his preceding potations he poured himself a drink and held the glass up so that the light shone through the pale liquor. He tipped backward and forward on his heels and in derisive dumb show toasted the pictured women before he drank. Then he pressed his handkerchief against his lips with a flourish, and with exaggerated carefulness, placed the glass back over the neck of the bottle.

"Perhaps I do—and then again—perhaps I don't," he repeated badgeringly.

At the taunt in his tones Zoya's gentleness slipped from her. Her body grew tense, like that of an animal before it springs; and like an animal she made a sinuous, swift movement that covered the space between herself and the wall. She lifted one of the photographs from its place and held it up even with her face.

"Look at us! Look at us, Nicolai!" she challenged, her head held high. "Am I not more beau-ti-ful than this one? Tell me, am I not more beau-ti-ful? Ah, yes, you know it is so! This, then, for your woman of the South!" With a crash of splintering glass she smashed the picture across the edge of the table, and with incredible swiftness snatched another from the wall. Before the trader's arms closed about her she had broken three.

"You—you damned little savage!" He swung her off her feet and bore her struggling, toward the couch. "You—You she-wolf!" The contact of his foot with the bear rug before the hearth threw him momentarily out of balance. At the same instant the girl made a violent effort to free herself.

Instead of trying to hold her, Nick surprisingly let her slip to the floor. Before she could recover he was kneeling beside her holding her down with both hands. He laughed at her spasmodic attempts to rise. "You little she-wolf!" he repeated admiringly. "You'd smash all my pretty ladies, would you! By God, I didn't think any of you half-breeds had that much fight in you!" There was a new interest in his look and a distinct tone of pleasure in his voice. He had reached that self-re-

vealing stage of intoxication where he wanted to tell the truth about himself.

"You know, Zoya, you native women ought to learn this—it's pursuit a man enjoys—Now, now, lie still there, honey! Lie still, and I'll tell you something. It's pursuit that makes a woman desirable, not surrender. Damn those who surrender! You half-breeds are too easy, Zoya—now, now, there you go fighting me again. . . . Wait. W-a-i-t a minute. I won't hurt you, Zoya, if you lie still. Darn it, I want to talk to you—have a conversation with you, don't you understand? I want to *tell* you things for your own good!" He tightened his grip on her wrists as the girl struggled silently, fiercely, like a fox that feels the tongs of the killer about its throat. He laughed. When he stopped, the clock seemed to burst into louder ticking for a few minutes.

"Take me, now, for instance," Nick went on. "I've always wanted what I couldn't have. I always want what I can't get. . . . Isn't that hell, now, Zoya? Yes. . . . I've always been like that. If you'd only known that in the beginning, eh?—you poor little devil." There was pity in his voice as he looked down into her flushed face, her flashing eyes, and the dark hair that had come loose from its confining pins and lay on the black fur of the rug. As the wind ruffles the bay into varying shades, so the alcohol colored his moods with quick changes. He regarded her for a long, contemplative moment.

"You are a handsome savage, Zoya. Damned if you're not, with your hair all down that way like a wild woman," he admitted with appreciation. "I like you best that way. This half-educated business never did

appeal to me. I want one thing or the other—Ah-h, now honey, don't keep on fighting me like this. . . . You didn't come up here to fight with me, did you? You came up here to tell me something, didn't you?" With his softening mood his voice sank to a caressing lowness. He lowered his face to hers. "Come, now, Zoya . . . sweetheart . . . you like me a *little* bit—don't you?" he murmured close to her ear as he snuggled his face in her hair. "Just—a—l-i-t-t-l-e, l-i-t-t-l-e bit. . . ." The words ended with his lips against her throat.

The girl gradually ceased struggling. With a sigh, she allowed her arms to relax, and lay still, though unresponsive. Nick raised her, not ungently, to a sitting position. "That's a good girl," he said, patting her knee approvingly.

With a weary gesture she brushed the hair back from her face and the two sat for a moment looking into one another's eyes, she with the knowledge that she had given her soul to this careless white man who regarded her as a creature of the moment; he with the certainty that his treachery would eventually break her heart.

"Darn it, Zoya, I *will* be decent to you tonight." A sort of poetic pity forced the words from him. From his kneeling position on the floor he reached to the couch back of him and dragged down some cushions. "I'll just show you how nice I can be when I want to." He placed the cushions at her back and made her comfortable. "We'll sit here a little while before the fire, and then—we'll go right down stairs again—won't we?"

There was adoration in Zoya's eyes now. He, the

king, had condescended to make her comfortable. She caught his hand and held it against her breast. "Oh, Nicolai, why don't you be always so good to me!" she exclaimed, a break in her voice. She settled herself gratefully in the circle of his arm, utterly forgetful of everything in the world except his physical nearness.

The man sat for a short time without speaking, while the alcohol brought out another psychological quirk of his nature. His enigmatic eyes were fixed on the flames as if he were visualizing something that came often to his mind. He took up a handful of the creole's dark loosened hair, winding and unwinding it about his hand. "Zoya," he said at last, "sitting here with you like this makes me think of something." The Alaskan was speaking in him now. "This is the moon of Kancha-oon, you know. September, when the first frost touches the hills and the short grass begins to turn. . . .

"I like this month in Alaska better than any other of the year. I like to think tonight that you and I are out in the hills in a lodge by a mountain lake I know. We both are Indians, Zoya, squatting on a bear pelt before our fire. We are sun-browned, simple, uneducated, contented. Our winter supply of salmon, which you and I have caught and smoked, is stored here in our lodge. We can smell it, and the tang of smoked hides. We are very comfortable, very warm, for our walls are covered with skins—bear, moose, wolverine, because I go out and hunt in the hills with the others of our tribe. I keep my squaw and my children in food and clothing. There's something satisfying in that, Zoya." He straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. It was not hard to vizualize him as he pic-

tured himself, a hunter tall, slim, clean as a blade. "I am strong. I am swift of foot. I like to take my chance against the things of the forest. I am the strongest man in my tribe." Unconsciously his voice had taken on the timbre of an Indian chant. In that moment, though neither of them knew it, he was near kin to the half-breed girl. "And you, Zoya, you like to prepare the meat and the hides for winter when I bring home my kill. We are dressed in the tanned skins of moose and caribou. You have trimmed them with bright colored beads. Our moccasins are soft, and when we walk we feel the earth close against our feet."

"Oh, tell me more, Nicolai!" she entreated, when he paused. "Tell me more!"

"We are happy, Zoya, because we know nothing of the ways of white men. And soon we shall go down the river to the village on the sea-coast. Go down in great canoes with others of our tribe, to the feast of Thanksgiving to the Spirit of Plenty, for fishing and hunting has been good. We shall dress with the splendor of savages, beads, headdresses, blankets of crimson and blue; and we shall dance, Zoya, to the sound of drums, and sing and feast and love, free as the Indian is free before he knows the ways of the South. Zoya—" he tightened his arm about her—"Zoya, I want to live like that." For the moment he was sincere. "When I think of you and me that way, Zoya, by God, I'd rather have you than any other woman in the world! . . . I'd be true to you then—if we both were natives."

The creole missed the subtle insult of this—the more insulting because it was unconscious.

"But Nicolai, I love you best as a white man—a

great white man!" Zoya drew away so that she might look admiringly into his face, flushed now with his own *macoola*-prompted eloquence. "I don't want to be an Indian. I want to be white—all white like you." She gazed into his eyes as if she thought he could grant her the wonderful boon of white blood.

There was a pause. Because of an opened door below, the throb of drums and guitars came up, primitive as the rhythm of the dance he had just pictured.

"No, no, Zoya!" Nash's mood had changed again, and his laugh was the indulgent, superior laugh of the white man. "I'd rather keep you savage, with your hair down like this—" He moved and wound a long strand about his neck, pulling it to bring the girl's cheek against his own. "Remember, honey, how I used to pull your braids when you were little?" He chuckled reminiscently. "Sometimes, even now,—I don't know why it is—but I want to drag you about by your hair—to hurt you." He tugged again at her hair, experimentally. "I'm a cruel brute, Zoya. Not all the time—but just sometimes." His voice was growing thicker. "I'm cruel as hell, Zoya. . . . You should never have anything to do with me—never." And he kissed her on the lobe of her ear while he slipped his hand caressingly over her bare arm to the elbow.

The girl trembled, by sheer will keeping herself from responding. In the silence the muffled sound of the drum came up from below, ceaseless, provocative, alluring in its monotonous beat.

Nash stirred uneasily.

"I guess we'd better go down now, Zoya."

But neither of them made a move to rise.

The loud ticking of the clock told off the seconds as they looked into each other's eyes—seconds suddenly grown precious, strangely electric.

"Zoya . . . Zoya . . ." he murmured, his hot face seeking hers through the tangle of her hair.

The faint throb of the drum stole again into the room, while he kissed her throat gently, lingeringly—kissed it until he reached her mouth. Then she turned to him with a passionate gesture of surrender.

"Oh, Nicolai," she whispered. "Always—always you make me for-get ever-ry thing . . . ever-ry thing in the world . . . but you . . ."

In the room below fishermen were shouting. Feet made still heavier by *macoola* were thudding festively to thumping chords, and the dances were growing wilder and more individual. Side-money, Nash's helper on the fox-ranch of Oo-koon, finally dragged his Aleut partner into a corner and began a solo performance, the steps of which were plainly dictated by his potations. When the girl failed to follow him, he shook her drunkenly, attempting to show her by example wherein she had failed. She stood aside in pigeon-toed meekness to watch him. Something in this docile attitude irritated the man, for he suddenly executed a wild, leg-flinging shuffle, and made a grab for the girl's long black braid. He proceeded to whirl her about by it like a sack on the end of a rope. Her yelps of distress started an avalanche of assistance her way, and in another moment Side-money was submerged in a mass of heaving, struggling, shouting humanity, while spectators on the side lines cheered and yelled unreasonably but with enthusiasm.

This mêlée was at its height when Gary Tynan, returning after a profane hour and a half struggle with a refractory engine of the *Simmie and Ann*, stepped up on the veranda of the Governor's House. Hot, sweaty, besmudged with oil, he stood a moment in the doorway looking about for Zoya. Then hastily he approached the "free-for-all" in the corner. He was in a mood to welcome a plunge into the combat, had it been necessary, but a glance convinced him that his charge was not there.

He turned and saw Zoya just entering the side door. She stood alone, one hand behind her on the knob.

With an exclamation in which relief and irritated responsibility were equally mingled, he crossed over to her. His trouble with the gas engine had awakened his slumbering resentment at being drawn into what he scornfully termed chaperoning Zoya.

"I'm sorry for leaving you alone so long, Zoya." His tone was pleasant by conscious effort. "But that darned engine—" He checked himself. "Get your wraps. I'll take you home now." There was a ring in his voice no woman would have thought of disobeying.

Before the girl could answer the door behind her opened and Nicholas Nash came into the room. It was obvious, from the glazed look in his eyes and the aroma of *macoola* about him, that he had stopped in the kitchen on his way downstairs for several more drinks of the fiery brew.

"Wha's the row?" he demanded thickly of Gary, as if that young man were responsible for the agitation in the corner.

"Search me!" Gary replied shortly. "I just came in

myself." He turned to the creole girl and added: "Ready, Zoya?"

She made an obedient step forward.

"Where d'you think you're goin'?" ejaculated Nash belligerently. "I-I've got a-a danze wi' you, Z-Zoya."

"Look here, Nash," Gary attempted to reason with the man. "This girl can't stay here any longer. Why, half that bunch is drunk already!"

"S-s-sure they are," admitted the trader, taking Zoya's arm. "I'm drunk m'self—gettin' drunker ever' minute, too. . . . Come—Z-Zoya. You like me whether 'm drunk or shober, don' you?" He started to place a fumbling arm about her.

Zoya's timid answer was lost in an explosive yell from the corner. Gary's jaw grew rigid and his gray eyes took on a steely glint. He jerked Nash's hand from the girl's arm. "Get your wraps, Zoya. I'll meet you on the veranda," he said tersely.

He hooked his other arm through that of the trader and swung open the side door. Before Nash could recover he shoved him into the quiet hall and shut out the sound of the mêlée.

"I'm not trying to intrude on your affairs, Nash, nor do I want to dictate to you, but I'm responsible for Zoya tonight," Gary said firmly. "I promised Sasha and the girl's mother I'd look after her. I'd have taken her home long ago, if I hadn't been kept out on the bay with that damned engine. *That's* no place for her." He jerked his thumb backward indicating the room where the yelling had taken on renewed vigor.

The trader teetered uncertainly on his heels, standing with both thumbs under the armholes of his waistcoat.

He surveyed the cheechako with intense and drunken concentration.

"Shay—" he hiccoughed as he made a futile effort to snap his fingers at Gary. "Who d'you think you are —anyway—comin' round tryin' t'run my women? Takes shum one s-s-marter 'n a cheechako to get ahead of Nick Nas-Nas-Nash! I've been lookin' out for Zoya m'self for lasht hour." He drew his chin in and straightened importantly. "Too bad you weren't here to chap-chaperon us. And as for S-Sasha—I'm c-c-apable lookin' out for her, too; an' wha's more—I intend to. An' look here, Tynan. I'm gettin' tired of havin' you spyin' round here—d'you hear. I——"

"Confound it, Nash! Shut up. You're becoming a nuisance. You're so full of *macoola* you smell to high heaven. If you take my advice you'll go to bed and sleep it off before you start talking. You're not responsible." Gary brushed contemptuously by and made his way out to the veranda, where he took Zoya's arm with little ceremony, and steered her down the steps.

Nash was in that befuddled condition where he was physically unable to fight, but striking through the numbness that was swiftly overcoming him came the thought that he had been accused of drunkenness—supreme insult to the intoxicated. He must resent this aspersion. He began to run unsteadily and came abreast of his departing guests just as they were passing the cannon.

"Look—here, you damned cheechako," he mumbled, lurching against Gary. "You come back here 'till I s-s-ettle this wi' you—you——"

Gary, white-faced and tight-lipped, turned swiftly and grasped the trader by the shoulders. "Zoya, get on

ahead there. Then wait for me. Now then—" he brought his attention back to the struggling Nash, and shook him. "You're in no condition to fight, you fool! . . . Oh, you still want it do you? Well—" The two men swayed together. There was a quick movement of Gary's leg as it tangled with the trader's, and then Nash was sitting flat on the grass alongside the old cannon, staring stupidly at his own two feet straight out in front of him. The moonlight fell on his sleek blond head and the mussed bosom of his finely plaited white shirt. His body wavered and his chin sank little by little. It rested at last on his chest, and one arm came up uncertainly and twined itself about the cold muzzle of the sturdy little cannon.

Gary, surveying him, felt the storm in his mind suddenly clearing away. It was with a distinct effort that he controlled a desire to laugh as he walked briskly down the flagged path to overtake the creole girl.

A few minutes later the trader stirred, raised his head, and looked about him dazed. He was alone outside his house. The sounds of combat inside had ceased. Once more the music came thumping out into the cool, dim night. The roof of the Governor's House was a silhouette against an indigo, star-pierced sky, and the bust of Catherine stood out dark and strong. Nick's wandering eye focused on the Iron Empress. Already the happenings of the last quarter of an hour had vanished from his befuddled mind. He hiccoughed twice very solemnly, placing one hand nicely over his mouth. "B-e-g—par-don," he said with elaborate politeness. His arm tightened about the cannon as about the neck of a dear friend. The other hand came up waveringly and remained poised for the im-

pressive salute to the royal Catherine that was struggling to come forth from the alcoholic mazes of his brain. He hiccoughed again.

"G' night, Kate—ol' girl! G' night!" he murmured.

And with a snuggling, childish movement he laid his cheek against the rust-pitted cannon of Baranoff and sank into untroubled slumber.

CHAPTER XII

THE Governor's House fell behind Gary as his long strides covered the stretch of dim, white road between himself and Zoya. When he reached her side, she turned quickly, halting him by placing a hand on either of his arms.

"Garee—" She hesitated, with a timid glance back at the lighted windows of the house. He did not speak for a moment as he looked into her face, white in the moonlight, her great dark eyes nearly level with his own. "Garee— We will not say to Sasha or to my mother how the unpleasant ending came to the party, will we?"

He realized with sudden pity, that Zoya was trying to protect the trader from the consequences that might attach to him should his activities as host become known in her family. His contempt for the man vanished in his compassion for the girl.

"No." His voice was gentle when he answered her. "No, Zoya, of course not." And they walked in silence to the hotel.

He bade her good night and climbed the creaking stairway to his room. Though it was late and he was very weary, sleep refused to come. He lay staring at a spot of moonlight on a peeled log rafter, while impressions of the last two days flooded upon him. He saw

Nash as the trader had been yesterday on Rocking Moon standing before the fireplace holding Sasha Larianoff's hand, when he, Gary, had brought in the firelog; Nash at the piano a few hours later, singing love songs to the girl; and finally Nash upstairs in the dimly lighted hall of the ranch-house, with the half-breed Zoya in his arms.

He turned his restless dark head on the pillow, impatiently telling himself that all this was none of his business. He was merely a bird of passage in a little out-of-the-way Alaskan village, he reminded himself, rather bleakly; here today, gone tomorrow. Yet, he could not get away from his thoughts. He guessed that the trader had been making love to Zoya for some time. That neither Sasha nor the Colonel suspected this seemed incredible. Still, both girls had known Nash all their lives. He stood almost in the place of a brother to Sasha, for the tie of friendship between families is very strong in the thinly populated North. Zoya, of the meek Aleut blood, was as completely dominated by the arrogant white man as her fore-mothers had been by the Russians. Sasha, affectionate, loyal and judging others by herself, would hardly look for treachery in her own family; and the Colonel, though alive to Nash's weakness where other women were concerned, was one of that old-time chivalrous type, who considered the women of his own household utterly protected from the selfishness and lusts of men, merely because they were of his household. That Nash would take advantage of Zoya would be to the old Colonel a monstrous and unthinkable thing. Meanwhile the trader, like many another white man in Alaska, was sowing the seeds of tragedy. Gary wondered how it

all would end. For the time being he was puzzled over the psychological make-up of a man who could make love to both mistress and maid at the same time. He had yet to learn how little the half-breed counts with the white man in the game of life and love.

Though he kept on trying to convince himself that all this was no concern of his, he found himself fervently hoping that Father Anton would return before he took passage south on the *Starr*. The affair between Nash and Zoya could not have progressed if the priest had been home, of that Gary was positive. Sasha, too, needed some one on whom she could depend. Misfortune had set her feminine little shoulder to the wheel of business, but underneath her show of independence and efficiency, he felt there was in her an unsuspected desire to lean on some one stronger than herself. While he admired the valiant nature of his small employer, it was this very quality in her which aroused him to a secret protective tenderness.

When tardy sleep finally overtook him, he was wishing that his might be the strength on which Sasha Larianoff would depend, and his last waking thought was that he did not want to take passage south—just yet.

This desire crystallized into a decision the next day when he returned to Rocking Moon with the mail. Sasha, a shadow of disappointment in her eyes, read aloud paragraphs from the letters she had received from her father. His return was again delayed until the middle of November.

When the girl finished reading she sat silent a long time, her head bent, her eyes on the flames leaping up the black throat of the chimney. Gary thought she

looked very little, and somehow forlorn, as he watched the flickering glow pencil her profile and touch in lustres of gold on the bronze curls massed at the back of her head. The amber light played on the exquisite curve beneath her small chin in a way that set him wondering what it would be like to cup his hand under that rounded softness.

It was that evening that he decided to stay on Rocking Moon until Father Anton's return.

He said nothing of this until a few days later, when he and Sasha, followed by the ever-faithful Alexander, were tramping across the Island toward a point on the northwest coast, where the girl wanted to investigate a fox burrow. It was a sunless autumn afternoon and they came out of the cool, aromatic freshness of the forest into a narrow tundra-meadow along the edge of the cliffs, where some gnarled and wind-stunted trees were etched in writhing attitudes against the gray space beyond. The tundra was soft and spongy beneath their feet and ivory-white with little balls of Alaska cotton, sticking up like so many tiny floss dusters on the ends of their six inch stems.

Gary led the way to a fallen tree and the two, with the fox between them, sat down, facing the ocean. About them the smell of dying grass and browning leaves filled the air with the shadowy sadness of vanished summer. The sea was quiet and olive-tinted. It rose and fell in long, slow swells about three fang-like rocks where shags sat in black and silent brooding.

Sasha put an arm over Alexander's back, as he sat on his haunches, and leaning her bare head against him, looked dreamily down.

"I love to watch the sea—it's so changeable—so

alluring." She broke the stillness, then paused as a shag on the rock below extended its wings in a weird, stationary pose of flying. A moment later it flapped away across the water, long neck out-thrust toward a distant fog-bank that shut out the rest of the world. Even as they looked the sea grew gray and wan beneath the advancing mist.

"This sort of a day—all lavender and gray—makes me think of the time when I shall be growing old." Her faintly husky voice had taken on a musing undertone. "Old age must be something like the fog. We see it creeping on . . . very quietly, graying the bright colors of youth—cooling the hot blood of desire. Before it reaches us we feel a curious dread of it—of its inevitability, a deadening sense of loss—" she was hesitating as though she sought in spirit to span the years she had not as yet known. "Then—finally when it is upon us, as the fog is on us now, we look about to find a peace, a remoteness from the strife and annoyance of living that makes us as serene as—" she broke her musing with a little laugh—"as Seenia dreaming in the firelight after dinner." She turned suddenly, smiling at Gary with her eyes. "What do you think of that idea? Do you, too, think that all the mean and little things, all the trials and sorrows will be softened and veiled for us when we are old, as those clawing, ugly arms of the trees are dimmed now by the fog? Isn't that possible?" Across Alexander's mauve fur her clear amber eyes questioned him.

To Gary it was incongruous that she, radiant with health and youth, should be thinking of age. He could not imagine her ever being any older. Manlike, he did not want to think of her being any older—but always

like this with her bare, bright head backed by the silver fog. The quiet and mystery of it was pressing in on all sides, enclosing them in a lessening world, creating a strange new feeling of intimacy. From the tundra came a damp earthy odor which awakened in him a sense of unity with the wilderness, which, shared, in this manner, became another bond between himself and this girl of the North. He wanted to reach over and take the hand that lay on Alexander's neck—a small, firm hand with fingers tapering to pink nails with little moons at the base.

Instead he discreetly stroked Alex's silky back.

"It may be that age comes on us that way," he said, "but—I can't associate *you* with it, Sasha. Besides, in your country no one grows old. Look at the Colonel at sixty—he's still a mere stripling. But the fog . . . " He looked around at the silver obscurity that hemmed them in. "Once, when I was a little boy, I read something that has influenced my thoughts of the fog; a bit of verse called *The Fog-Maiden:*

> *" 'In from the sea, born of mystery*
> *Swift as a gull she flies:*
> *And oh, the snare of her wind-tossed hair,*
> *And the lure of her gray-green eyes!'*

he quoted. "Now, what do you think of *that* idea?" he repeated her question.

She had been listening rapt, shining-eyed, with an interest that was deeper than that called forth by his words.

"Oh!" she exclaimed bringing her hands together, "I was afraid for a moment that you were going to tell me I was childish, as Nicolai always does when

I speak my thoughts." She smiled at him. "I like so much to exchange ideas!" In her earnestness she edged toward him, causing Alexander to shift his position with an air of intense boredom. "Dad says one reason the Larianoffs make such happy marriages, is because they remember that, after all, matrimony is seventy-five per cent conversation—not that we are concerned with that, Gary," she interposed in a matter-of-fact fashion, "but I do like to sit down with a friend and say: 'Now, I think thus and so about this subject—' " she put her head on one side and tapped one palm with the finger of her other hand,—" 'you tell me what *you* think.' And then, Gary, I want him to give me his ideas, you know, just as men talk to each other. Someway I always imagine people's minds are like jewel-boxes—full of all kinds of sparkly things if I could only find the key to them. But," she hesitated—"but it's so hard to make men talk of anything outside of—of personal matters."

Gary could understand why a man might rather talk of personal matters when sitting tête-à-tête with Sasha Larianoff, but he did not tell her so.

A lone crane, lost in the fog, flapped by over their heads and the girl laid a quieting arm across the fox and drew him against her. "But you are different," she continued. "Yes, you are quite different from any of the men I have known up here." She rested her chin on Alexander's head and looked at Gary with frank, thoughtful eyes. "I shall miss you when you go South."

In view of his decision, which he had not yet mentioned, her certainty that he was going away disconcerted him for a moment.

"But I don't want to go just yet," he declared with unintentional warmth. "I'd like to stay here until—anyway, until your father returns. That is if you want me," he amended hastily. "But—if my services as 'hired man' are not required,—" his teeth flashed white in a smile and his gray eyes looked light and laughing in the tan of his face as he made a quick, dismissing gesture—"I've decided to take a cabin over in Rezanoff and—well, just stay around a bit—to look things over, you know."

"I'm glad," she said simply. Then, giving Alexander a squeeze she rubbed her cheek against his ear. "We're both glad, aren't we, Alexander Baranoff, that he's going to stay," she added playfully. "And of course, Mr. Gary Tynan, you'll continue being the 'hired man' on Rocking Moon, if you want to be."

And thus it happened that the *Starr* on her southward trip, went without him. The day following its departure Gary returned from the other side of the Island to find that Nicholas Nash had paid Sasha a hasty visit and was already gone on to the Island of Oo-koon. Gary smiled to himself when he heard this. Instinctively he knew that the trader had come to investigate his continued residence on Rocking Moon.

It was shortly after this that Gary's work on the ranch was doubled. Colonel Jeff with his customary inefficiency, was helping on the *Simmie and Ann* when he fell overboard. His ducking brought on a severe attack of rheumatism. His lamentations as he sat confined to his chair by the fireplace, were punctuated with vigorous and profane aspersions aimed at the absent Feodor, who, the old fellow had convinced himself was in some occult way responsible for this

recurrence of his malady. Feodor was expected back to the Island as soon as he returned from a neighboring village where he had gone to visit relatives while Nature put the finishing healing touches on his arm.

Gary had never felt more physically fit than now, and in addition hope was growing slowly within him. He felt stirrings of his lost literary sense. Almost daily the plot-germ of the story which lay at the back of his mind tantalized him with flashes of life. And, too, the spell of the Northern autumn wove itself into the vague subconscious process—the spell of glamorous October days that turned the grass on the rolling, treeless hills to amber and cardinal and brown, showing them clear and vivid in the crisp air of the frosty mornings, veiling them with silver in the afternoon fog that drifted down from Bering Sea, touching them with shadow and mystery at night under the first pale flushes of the Northern Lights. It was not alone the outward beauty that moved him. It was that illusive, intangible, exquisite thing that sent his mind questing behind and beyond what his eyes visioned. He felt the spirit of something new and clean and vigorous manifesting, and he wanted to understand it, to make it his own, so that he might give it out again in his work to the crowded, plodding world of civilization.

This quest of Gary's drew him into many a chat with Seenia. He was pleased and not a little flattered that the old Aleut's deep-set eyes always rested on him affectionately. As he sat on a footstool close to her chair listening to her tales of those days before she was a Christian, she often stopped in her recitals to smile at his interest and pat him on the shoulder.

From her he learned much of the topography of Oo-koon, the Great Cave, the landing place where the whalers used to go for the December ceremonies beneath the swinging mummies. She took a childlike pride in telling him of her Christian duties too, when she had been the keeper of the light on Father Paul's tomb, and once, when they sat alone in the living-room, he learned more of the eyeless Mask of Jade and her pathetic efforts to win the secret of its hiding-place from the spirits, and from the God of Father Anton. Poor, half-civilized Seenia, bargaining with her deities! Her soul was a battle-ground where prayer and incantation kept up continual strife!

One foggy afternoon Sasha walked with Gary to the nearest feeding-station. The mist, laden with the odors of forest and sea, was cool and damp in their faces. They swung along the hard sand unable to see more than fifty feet ahead of them. Sasha, cupping her hands about her mouth, talked "fox" to the invisible animals she knew to be near.

Answering yelps came from behind ghostly tree-trunks above the beach grass, and she laughed delightedly. "Listen to the barkative little rascals!" Again Gary experienced that feeling of unreality that came so often to him on Rocking Moon—the sensation of participating in some Oriental fairy-tale where enchanted foxes revealed the secrets of the woods to a bronze-haired girl.

He paused, letting the buckets of food hang unsupported from the wooden yoke across his shoulders, and grinned at her with the camaraderie which came so easily to them both lately. "Just listen to what they tell *me!*" he boasted, and sent out a fox call he

had been practising. But the moment that followed brought only silence.

Sasha smiled at him, and though the smile was mischievous, in her eyes was the momentary tenderness a woman feels for one who tries and fails.

"Never mind, Gary," she comforted. "They do not know you well enough yet. Ah, see how beautiful they are getting!" A shadowy form emerged from the fog. The fox stood a moment watching them, its astute little face on one side; then it sidled off into the mist again.

The animals, in summer only about the size of a large cat, were, with the approach of colder weather, taking on a thicker, heavier coat of fur exquisite in its maltese lustre. Gary at first had been surprised at their smallness, for two of them could easily be carried in a gunnysack. It was judicious stretching which turned the green pelt into the long silken neck-piece of commerce.

When he commented on the color, she nodded. "It's really camouflage, too, you know. If these same foxes were up in the Arctic they'd be snow white now. The blues and whites are not a different species, merely color phases of the same fox. They change their color according to the latitude. Isn't it clever of the darlings!"

She continued with enthusiasm telling him what she had read of the animals, interspersing her information with quaint observations of her own.

"You will see how Feodor handles them—just like babies!" she concluded. "I'm so happy because he is coming home tomorrow."

When they reached the feeding-station and Gary

had emptied his buckets, the girl suggested continuing down the beach to Lampadny Point and crossing over to the tomb of Father Paul. "I like to walk in thick fog," she explained.

Locating the trail across the Point was not an easy matter, but Sasha found it at last and they walked along it single file. In the cool density only a narrow circle of yellowed rice-grass was visible about them. The wheat-like heads, silvered with moisture, were empty husks now, and the brown pods of the lupine too, had burst, spilling their seeds to the ground. Like shadowy drawings on the background of the mist, tall, dried stalks of dead Indian celery held aloft the umbrella-shaped skeletons of summer flowers. The passing of the girl and the man stirred the damp scent of dried grasses and leaves mellowed by the frost into a covering for the winter cradle of all this slumbering life.

They had traversed half the way across the Point in silence when the quiet was broken by the unmistakable sound of voices coming from ahead. Sasha stopped and tried to pierce the vapor. "Some one visiting Father Paul," she said; then sent out a clear hulloo in the direction of the old missionary's tomb.

No answering call came back, and to Gary the muffled silence which followed was somehow ominous. The girl's eyes were puzzled when they met his.

"Why—they don't answer," she said slowly; then more quickly, "let's hurry and see who it is."

As they hastened along the narrow trail the clank of oar-locks floated in through the fog, and a few moments later, when they emerged at the edge of the outer beach, the deadened, intermittent bark of a starting engine came to them. It was followed by the con-

tinuous throb of a speeding launch hidden away in the white mist that was thick upon the sea. Gary, with the launchman's instinct, listened curiously to the peculiar, irregular pulsations of the motor.

"Strange they didn't wait for us!" Sasha turned to him. "Perhaps they didn't hear me . . . Or they might be going around to the ranch-house now." She, too, tilted her head listening to the diminishing sound of the exhaust. "No," she reconsidered. "They're heading right out to sea. Halibut fishermen, very likely. The Colonel and I saw a couple of fishing-schooners in the offing the other day."

Gary was bending to examine the footprints in the sand. From the indications two men had been ashore, the tomb their destination. They had walked from the landing-place of their skiff, but—he wondered if they had not run back to it. The shortened, deep-toed impressions left by their returning feet would indicate as much. But of this he said nothing to Sasha.

"They came ashore to light Father Paul's lamp," said the girl confidently, as they moved toward the six-foot cross looming dimly through the fog.

She climbed to the flat-topped tomb, and wiping the befogged glass over the *lampada,* peered into the recess. Her indignant voice floated to him as she opened the little door.

"Why, Gary, they never put a *drop* of oil in the lamp!" She held out the heavy glass bowl toward him. It was empty. He knew how Sasha's inborn romanticism delighted in the old Muscovite custom of her ancestors, a custom still observed by the fishermen of the coast who gave thanks for a good fish run by

lighting the lamp. Because he himself had felt the mediæval charm of this practice, he understood Sasha's annoyance, yet he wondered if underneath the whole incident there was not something more than either of them suspected.

But he shook off the thought impatiently. Surely Sasha, living in this country all her life, would know the ways of her countrymen better than he—a tenderfoot. He shrank from appearing an alarmist in her eyes.

"Perhaps—Well, I don't know much about your customs, Sasha, but perhaps they forgot the oil, but just came to say a prayer—or something like that," he managed in the half-bashful manner of men who speak seldom of sacred things. He bent to look again at the footprints that encircled the tomb.

"Of course! That's what they must have done." But the girl's face was shadowed; then meeting his solicitous eyes she gave an apologetic little laugh. "It's impolite of them, anyway. And this fog—it makes it seem mysterious, and I don't like mysteries on my Island!"

They talked of other things as they retraced their steps.

A breeze began to stir when they were half-way home, and with a swiftness almost incredible the fog rolled seaward.

As the float stood out clear again, Sasha exclaimed: "Nicolai must be here! See the *Pup* alongside the *Simmie and Ann!* Perhaps he has brought Feodor home!" An amused look came into her eyes as she continued slowly: "Now . . . I wonder if it could have been he who went—but no—" She shook her

fog-dampened head, and her laugh held an undertone of amusement. "One could hardly connect Nicolai with any act of piety, the bad boy. Besides he's never grateful for anything. But I'll ask him, anyway, about the lamp of Father Paul," she concluded, as Gary left her to go to the barn.

But when the girl entered the living-room all thought of the afternoon event vanished. She found Colonel Jeff in his chair by the fireplace, his rheumatic leg straight out in front of him, his sparse hair standing on end, and his arm going up and down like a pump handle. He was emphasizing remarks addressed to the obviously inattentive Nicolai who leaned against the mantel.

"Hell's bells!" roared the Colonel. "If I had my hands on the scoundrel I'd kick him higher than the Devil can spit, so help me *G*—excuse me, Sasha, I—I didn't know you were back. But—but—" he stuttered in his effort to curb his language. "But I must express myself, by the lord! Sasha!" he looked up from his chair, bulbous nose shining, small eyes gleaming through his glasses, both palms outthrust in impotent anger. "Sasha, with me here helpless as a bug on its back, and work piling up higher every day on this ranch, *what* do you think that muffle-headed, fatuous son-of-a-gun has gone and done?"

"But, Colonel, who—what——"

The Colonel's reverberating bellow swallowed Sasha's voice, as he smote the arm of the chair with his fist. "Done deliberately, diabolically, with malice aforethought, by the lord, consorting with his kind in a *macoola* bat——"

Sasha turned impatiently to Nick, as the Colonel,

with maddening obscurity, continued to berate the unknown offender.

"Mercy, Nicolai, what *is* the matter?" she asked.

The trader shrugged his shoulders, tapped a fresh cigarette against his hand and replied nonchalantly:

"Oh, nothing much. Feodor got drunk again last night and broke his arm over."

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER his announcement, Nick stood erect, flicked a match into flame with his thumbnail, and applied it to his cigarette. Sasha's exclamation of dismay drew an oblique glance from his somnolent eyes. A few moments later he spoke sympathetically of her predicament.

"It's darned hard luck, I'll say, Sasha," he concluded. "Especially, when the Colonel is laid up with rheumatism and the trapping season is nearly here. Too bad you haven't a man working for you that knows foxes. Not that Tynan isn't a willing worker," he hastened to concede the absent man justice, "but the chap is a cheechako, after all, and he can't be expected to know everything." His tone conveyed the generous understanding of one who does know the ways of a hard country and is able to cope with them intelligently.

His quiet air of authority was especially effective today because of his physical appearance. He wore his customary outdoor clothes of forestry cloth and leather puttees, but the suit had been made by the best tailor in San Francisco. It set off the width of his shoulders and the symmetry of his slender, athletic limbs. In contrast with its dark green his freshly shaved face

and sleek light hair achieved for him the clean, youthful look of the well-groomed blond male. Every line of him suggested latent power, swift action, and strength on which a woman might depend—if Nick loved her.

But the girl who was in trouble now asked no advice from him. Neither did he offer any.

An hour later, when he was leaving, they were alone for a few minutes on the veranda. There came one of the pauses in conversation that is vibrant with unspoken thoughts. He stood looking down on her soft, bronze hair stirring in the wind.

"Well . . ." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, little fox-rancher." He spoke slowly, with a perceptible pause between the words as if he waited for her to ask him some question.

"Good-bye, Nicolai."

"Your fingers are cold," he said with unwonted gentleness. "See—" He smiled down at her, cupping her small hand in the comfortable warmth of both his own. "That's how I'd like to keep all the cold things of life away from you, Sasha. Just like that—if you'd let me."

She withdrew her fingers slowly, her gaze on the bay. When she said nothing Nick thrust his hands into the pockets of his knickerbockers, and with one of his odd returns to boyish mannerisms, hung his head as he stood on one foot, swinging the other in a small half-circle. "I—I want to do things for you, Sasha . . . but you'll never ask me, will you? I know I'm—I'm clumsy and hot-headed, and all; but I—oh, hang it—" the swinging foot came to firm rest beside the other and he lifted his head decisively. "Do you think

I'd come over here with bad news and never plan a way to help you out, Sasha, even though I do think it's foolishness for you to be running this blamed ranch?" She turned to face him. "Tynan can't do the work alone here much longer, and the Colonel looks as if he's in for a siege of rheumatism, so I've brought Side-money over with me—he's an old fox-man—and I'm going to leave him here whether you say so or not," he announced firmly. "It's what your father would expect—and mine too. . . . Well, good-bye, Sasha!" And without waiting for her to speak he lifted his hat and started abruptly away.

"Oh, Nicolai!" the girl ran after him as he was descending the steps, and laid a detaining hand on his arm. His half-embarrassed way of offering her help was completely disarming. "Nick, don't think I'm ungrateful!" she explained. "You *are* good and generous, I know, and I shall be glad to have Side-money —until Dad gets home. Thank you . . . thank you. . . ."

Standing on the bottom step his eyes were level with hers when he faced her. His smile was whimsical, and a trifle magnanimous, as if he remembered the night she had told him she could manage her affairs without his advice.

"It's not so bad to have good, old reliable Nick around, after all, is it?" he said.

She watched him swinging arrogantly along toward the float, his stiff-brimmed sombrero a trifle aslant. She could understand how another woman might grow to love Nick, with his changing moods, his masculine, dominant ways that lent his brief lapses into gentleness a fictitious charm out of all proportion to their

meaning. But—she smiled to herself—it wouldn't have been Nick if he had gone today without leaving behind him the impression of one who, though wronged, has been very generous.

Turning to go into the house, she saw Zoya dodge back from one of the living-room windows, but by the time she entered, the creole girl had gone on into the kitchen. After stopping to tell the Colonel of the addition to their working force provided by Nick, Sasha followed to share her information with Zoya, whom she found standing at a table with her back to the door, intent, apparently, on peeling potatoes for supper.

"Isn't it fine of Nicolai to lend us his man?" she called brightly. "He—" She paused. Something in the rigidity of the half-breed's back caused a look of concern to flash across her mobile features. "Why, *rodnaya!*" She ran to the girl. "You're crying! What's the matter, honey? Tell me!" She tried to gather Zoya into her small arms. "Come and tell me all about it."

The words of sympathy broke down Zoya's restraint, and she sank her dark head on the shoulder of her comforter, weeping in a strange, hopeless manner that shook her from head to foot.

Alarmed by such prolonged and wordless grief, Sasha led her to a cushioned window-bench and held her, patting her back and murmuring little Russian endearments, until, worn out by the intensity of her emotion, Zoya's convulsive sobs grew weaker and farther between.

"Of course," Sasha concluded, with the air of one who has solved a problem, "I know it's Feodor again. But don't you worry about him, dear. His arm can't

be broken any worse than it was the other time, you know."

Zoya raised her head from the dampness of Sasha's shoulder with surprising suddenness. Through a mist of misery great brown eyes looked a moment into amber ones. Incredulity was succeeded by affection in the tearful gaze before the creole caught the white girl's hands and kissed them with fervor that had something penitential in it.

"*Solnishko moyo,* you are good—too good to me!" she sobbed with apparent irrelevance. "I—I—Oh, Sasha, I——"

The sentence was never finished, for Gary's footsteps sounded at the back door at that moment, and Zoya, with the swiftness of a hurt animal, fled up the back stairs to hide her tear-stained face.

Sasha was puzzled over the other girl's distress. Though Zoya had been somewhat distrait and silent for a few days, she was not one given to easy tears. What could have happened today, besides the news of Feodor's broken arm, to cause such grief? Could Nick have said some thoughtless thing and hurt her?

With this thought came the memory of Zoya, watching him leave the veranda—or had she been watching him? It was strange about those two. When Sasha and the creole girl were children, Nick, seven years older, had always treated them alike with boyish tolerance. After he had been to the States to school this changed to condescension. Still later he began to take a diabolic delight in teasing the bashful Zoya about fictitious sweethearts, just to see her resent his maddening suppositions with flashing eyes and quick Russian

denials. Zoya was always handsome when angry. Then, Sasha remembered, when Nicolai returned from France a gradual change came in his attitude toward the girl. Sometimes, when in Father Anton's house at Rezanoff, he seemed deliberately to ignore her. Since they had moved to Rocking Moon, it was seldom that Sasha had seen Nick address her outside of a greeting and a farewell.

Sasha, always loyal, had resented this coldness toward their old playmate, almost as much as she regretted Nick's disconcerting lover-like warmth toward herself. She could not, however, conceive of Nick's deliberately hurting Zoya.

That night as she sat before her dressing-table, preparing for bed, the mirror gave back the reflection of Zoya entering her room, her usual good-night custom. There was a striking contrast between the two—Sasha, fair-skinned, bright-haired, seeming in her pale green satin kimono almost childlike compared to the taller, darker Zoya.

All traces of grief had vanished from the creole's face, but in her eyes was still the uncertain, half-fearful look, as if that had happened which she could not yet believe. She seemed oddly reluctant to go upstairs to her own room. She walked about aimlessly, picking up objects from the dresser, from the desk. Finally, taking a hairbrush she regarded it as she turned it over and over in her fingers.

"Sasha, *solnishko,* perhaps tonight you will like me to brush out your hair?" she suggested with a hint of timidity in her tone.

That sympathetic perception, which was so strong in her caused Sasha to accept the offer with sweet

gratitude, and as the other girl brushed the shining, wavy masses, she continued, with the intent of distracting Zoya's mind:

"That's the one thing in the world I'd like to have a maid for—and I'll have one, too, Zoya, when I've made Rocking Moon the biggest, most successful fox-ranch on the coast. Think what that will mean, dear!" Her eyes sparkled and her hands gestured at her slim reflection. "We'll both go down to the United States then and see some of the wonderful things Nick and Dad and Gary have told about. Do you know, honey, Gary told me today that there is a restaurant in San Francisco, *under a sidewalk,* mind you, where two thousand people can sit down to dinner at one time—with all the rest of the city walking over their heads! Can you imagine it! Four times as many as we have in the whole village of Rezanoff! And there are beautiful paintings and flowers all about them, and music playing—such music as we hear on the phonograph, only the diners can *see* the musicians playing!"

Zoya's incredulous look proclaimed her interest. She paused holding the brush poised as she gazed into the amber eyes that met hers in the mirror.

"Two—thousand—people!" she repeated in slow wonder. "Oh, the dishes they must have to wash in that place!"

"And Gary told me," went on Sasha, warming to her subject, "that there are buildings twenty stories and more, high—as high as the hill back of Rezanoff. There are many of them on both sides of the streets—like the ones we see in moving pictures, you know, and each one contains hundreds of rooms, as small as this one here, called offices, where girls like you and

me work all day. He says in winter, when the lights come on early, you can look up from across the street, and through the windows see layer after layer of those rooms one on top of another, with the girls working away as late as five o'clock in the afternoon. Think of being cooped up like a fox in a pen for eight long hours every day! Poor girls!"

Zoya, shaking her dark head and clucking her tongue in commiseration, returned to her brushing.

"And they have to go on working that way until some of the men—confined in the office with them most likely, marry them. Even then it isn't much better, Gary says, for the girls set up housekeeping in other big buildings called apartments, Zoya. Some of the apartments are only one room, not half as big as our living-room and the bed slides under the bathroom, and the dining-room table is the living-room table, and not a soul knows his neighbor in the next apartment. They have to keep their doors locked all the time, too, for there are men in the cities who make a profession of stealing. What hardships! What a life!

"We couldn't live like that, could we, Zoya?"

The creole shook her head in negation. "And Garee —will he be going back to the United States to live?" she inquired.

Sasha's face became serious. "I—I don't know," she answered slowly. "I hope he won't, Zoya."

"You like Garee? You like him better than Nicolai?" The questions came eagerly and the mirror reflected the creole's waiting attitude. During the pause that followed the rising wind rattled the window behind them and the shade rubbed noisily against the sides of the frame.

Sasha said: "Nicolai is like one of our family. I like Gary differently."

"Perhaps—" Zoya passed the brush down the length of the shining hair. "Perhaps it is that you love Garee," she said softly.

Sasha shook her hair over her flushing face and laughed.

"You are too sentimental, Zoya. . . . What do you know of love, you beautiful, dusky thing!"

A look of bitterness came suddenly into the half-breed's face.

"Dusky! Dusky!" she repeated, with a note of rising passion in her voice. "Yes. Dusky! Look at us!"

Surprised at the outburst, the white girl parted her curls hastily and raised her eyes.

Like a picture in a frame the two were reflected in the mirror—one the white and gold dawn, the other the sullen, amber dusk. The creole held a handful of her loosened ebon hair against the lustrous bronze below her.

"Look!" she cried, her black brows drawn together. "Look!" she commanded, and there was despair in her tone as she stripped her sleeve back and placed her tawny slender hand beside the little white one. *"That* is what love does! White fathers we both had—but because my Aleut mother dared to love a white man I am not white. I am not brown. I am *nothing!* No Indian can I love and marry, because my heart is white and will not let me. No white man will marry me because my skin is dark. What have I done to deserve this? What have I done that I must suffer and go alone all my life because of the love of my

mother?" she demanded passionately, her dark eyes flashing a protest against Fate. "What is left for me but to take love where I find it—a little here when it comes, a little there when it comes!"

The hairbrush fell clattering to the floor.

"Why Zoya, I never heard you speak——"

Unheeding, the creole went on: "Yes! Let the white man say: 'You half-breeds are too easy—too quick to surrender!'" she quoted bitterly. "But—what else is there for us? No white man will marry us, and soon—oh, so soon we are old. Love is not for the old. I will have it now! *Now!*" She drew back her head as if defying God Himself, and struck her chest with her clenched hands. "Though it is sin—though I burn in hell for a million years, I will have a white man's arms about me! I will have a white man's kisses on my face——"

"Oh, Zoya—Zoya—*please*—" Sasha, alarmed and pitying, sprang up and turned to clasp the other about the waist. "You hurt me when you talk so, *milaya.* Of course you shall have a white lover. You are so beautiful, so gentle, so good, Zoya!" She snuggled her head against the dark shoulder, trying to coax the rigid figure back to relaxation. "And to love—" she continued, half-shyly, "it is no sin, honey. It is—it must be very wonderful. . . . We both shall know, some day." She paused, then demanded protectingly: "Who's been telling you all those things about creoles, honey? Who's been making you unhappy lately? Some of those cannerymen in Rezanoff?"

The whine of the wind was the only sound for a few moments. Already the half-breed's protesting white blood was cooling and the submissive Aleut in

her coming to its own. She looked down into Sasha's face, and as if her mind had come back from the contemplation of some distant thing, she ran her slim hands gently down the other's hair. "Nobody tells me these things, *solnishko,*" she denied wearily, hesitating between the words. "Only—sometimes they come to me when I—I see your skin so white, so white, and your hair so shining. . . . Sasha, I'd give—I'd give my soul to be a white woman just for one day." The longing in her voice lingered on the air after she had ceased speaking.

Helpless to comfort, except by a display of her own affection, Sasha tightened her arms about her friend. The two girls stood silent, numbed by the cruelty of this mysterious, unanswerable problem of life.

The wind wafted in great sighs about the house, and there was the dull sound of charred logs falling in the living-room fireplace. After a time they heard the single tap of the ship's bell outside on the porch. Sasha stirred.

"The East Wind, Zoya," she said.

"Yes. The Spirit Wind of Oo-koon." The creole shivered.

"You're cold, honey. Come, we'd better both go to bed. In the morning everything will look brighter. Night is shadow time, anyway." Sasha drew her companion toward the door and opened it. "I'll take you upstairs."

Arm in arm the two girls ascended the steps. The light was dim in the unfinished hall and as the draft swept through it the flame of the bracket lamp flickered. The Colonel's peaceful snores bubbled out from behind his closed door. Then, unmistakably, there came

the muffled sound of a voice from Seenia's room. They paused to listen.

"Spirits, I call! I call!" Faint and thin the eldritch cadence rose. "Tell me truth! Where does it hide?"

Sasha shook her head pityingly. "Poor old Seenia," she whispered. "She's at it again. She still thinks the Spirit Wind can tell her where she's hidden the Mask of Jade. . . . I wish it could. But you run along to bed, dear. I'll go in and talk to her. Good night, Zoya. Pleasant dreams."

When Sasha stepped inside the old Aleut's room, the creole stood a moment gazing at the closed door. Then she walked slowly to her own room.

She turned up the wick of the lamp on the little table beside her narrow white bed, and crossed over to a vermilion Chinese chest in which she kept her clothes. Her bare, tawny arm slipped down among the neatly folded garments to the bottom. She drew out a post-card photograph, and stood looking with troubled eyes into the pictured face of Nicholas Nash. Slim, arrogant and alluringly reckless he appeared in his uniform and overseas cap. He had sent the post card from France to Sasha, who had never yet solved the mystery of its disappearance.

Zoya suddenly flattened the picture against her breast and glanced defiantly to that corner of the room where an icon of the Virgin smiled down at her. The next instant she slipped the card beneath her pillow, and making the sign of the cross, dropped penitently on her knees before that symbol of mother-love. Her long hair fell about her and over her face as she whispered her prayers. The wind rattled the window near her and the swelling diapason of the surf on the outer

beach drifted across the Island into the room. She prayed the long earnest prayers of one in trouble.

She finished at last and slipped off her kimono.

She was stepping into bed when the bell on the porch below again sounded a single, ghostly stroke. The girl turned her head, listening, considering. A strange look, like the birth of a forbidden idea, flashed into her dark eyes. Indecision held her for a moment. Then she cautiously tiptoed to the vermilion chest.

From the depths she brought an object no larger than an egg, a roll made of the fine grasses that grow only on the last island of the Aleutians, out where the West has become the East. It was a heathen thing containing a sacred herb, a match, a needle, a bit of ermine fur, and a piece of gold—an Aleutian spirit charm the like of which every Russian priest, since the days of the first Anton Larianoff, has tried to banish.

Zoya turned her light out, and with the charm held tightly, groped her way toward the vague opaque casement looking out on the dim, wind-torn bay. She squatted on the floor like a Buddha draped in long, dark hair and closing her troubled eyes, held out her arms toward the East, toward Oo-koon, with the charm lying flat across her palms.

After a long rigid moment she dropped them, and huddling in the darkness began tapping the sole of her bare foot with the mystic roll. The muted sound of her voice mingled with the weird flutings of wind and sea and tossing forest. "Oh, Spirits, I call! I call!" It rose and fell in an eerie chant of broken minors—the timbre of which is older by thousands of years than Christianity. "Come to me on the wind—the East

Wind of Oo-koon! Spirit of fire! Spirits of the Dead! Tell me truth . . ."

Zoya, the half-breed, sat with her back to the Virgin, sending out her anguished call into the night.

She was performing the forbidden Aleut mystery of "Talking to the Foot."

CHAPTER XIV

CLEAR, cold weather came—crisp, frosty blue nights, alight with the luster of stars that fringed the shimmering banners of the Northern Lights; pale gold days when the sun, swinging south, smiled brilliantly, but without warmth, and flung the dust of amethysts over the distant white ranges of the mainland. Toyon Lake froze over, and flashed like a blue diamond set in the amber of yellowing reeds. The bidarka, useless now, was brought to the barn and stowed away in the loft in front of a smaller, one-hatch skin craft, a kayak. Loose shingles on house and barn were nailed down and the moss chinking in the log walls of the other buildings was replenished. The pungent savor of brush-fires sending up blue smoke from the clearing back of the house set Sasha planning for next year's enlarged garden, as she took in the tiny silver tree-bells from the alder grove.

Side-money, whose other names remained a mystery which no one thought of solving, proved to be an uncouth fellow, but good-natured and a willing and intelligent worker with foxes. His one form of recreation was wandering about the Island gathering seashells from the beaches. He brought these home in a small knapsack he always carried with him, and later painted on them in colors of particular virulency, scenes he copied from tinted Alaskan postcards. He spoke with

pride of a time when he was a stevedore in Juneau and had made considerable side-money selling these to tourists. Nearly every day he edged confidentially up to Sasha and presented her with one of his livid masterpieces, until the mantel broke out into a measles of purple glaciers, cerise mountain peaks, and raw sienna canoes on leaden streams that ran in the perpendicular. The beauty-loving Sasha, powerless to stem the tide of his generosity, began to wear a hunted look whenever she saw him coming. Since she was too truthful to say anything in praise of his art, she confined herself to admiring the undecorated treasures, adding: "Why, Side-money, I've never seen such shells on Rocking Moon before! You know every foot of my Island, don't you?"

Colonel Jeff, still confined to his chair, divided his time between reading about all the late world calamities in the month-old newspapers, cursing the absent Feodor, and making what he called an "outfit" for the hairless Sampson. The little fox, though faithfully rubbed with hair-tonic, was still naked as a door-knob, and Colonel Jeff, after cutting out and discarding innumerable paper patterns, was at last sewing clumsily on a species of fox union-suit for his pet—the same being made of the old man's warmest sweater.

The autumn days went swiftly by thronged with work, interspersed, as is the custom of the country, with a good deal of recreation. Sasha and Gary went skating nearly every afternoon on Toyon Lake. Occasionally Zoya, strangely quiet these days, went with them, but she skated alone. Neither the young man's teasing nor Sasha's coaxing could persuade her to join hands with them as they skimmed, laughing, down the

smooth, inviting stretch of ice. Sometimes the creole, a tall, vivid figure in scarlet cap and sweater, would stand apparently watching, but in her dark eyes was the look of one who knows she is powerless to escape some Damoclean sword whose single thread is nearly severed.

One afternoon as she stood thus looking at the two merry skaters making curves so ludicrously elaborate that they could hardly maintain their balance for laughing at themselves, Side-money emerged from the forest trail dangling a pair of new skates in his mittened hand. When he had strapped them to his boots, he approached her in a few clumsy strokes, and laid a hand familiarly on her arm.

"Come on, kid, let's me'n you show 'em a few fancy stunts!" he said confidently.

Zoya turned slowly and for a moment allowed her eyes to rest on the squat figure with a gaze that was cold, impersonal and indifferent. Then she removed the offending hand and in studied silence swept off toward the far end of the lake.

On one such afternoon Nicholas Nash dropped in for one of his flying visits on his way to Oo-koon. He followed the Colonel's directions, and borrowing Side-money's skates from the nail in the barn, joined the others at the Lake. Sasha, catching sight of him, waved from a distance. He stood on the shore watching her sulkily as she glided toward him with Gary, but at her bright welcoming smile, he checked the words he seemed about to utter, and greeted them both pleasantly enough before he asked Sasha to skate. She took turns first with one and then with the other of the two men.

Gary claimed Sasha a second time, and the trader

sped away by himself. Zoya, who had been sitting on the bank, watched him for a moment, then as if she had suddenly decided on a course of action, she followed him in long, skimming strokes, overtaking him at a wooded point. Side by side they passed beyond it and were soon out of sight of the others.

When they reappeared sometime later they were skating together as only two can skate who both have a primitive sense of bodily rhythm. Sasha and Gary, panting from their own exertions, paused to admire them.

"Aren't they a splendid couple!" exclaimed the girl, pleased. "I'm so glad Nick is being nice to Zoya today. I'm afraid she sometimes finds it dull and lonely here with just me for company, although she denies it, dear, loyal child. But I shall make it up to her, Gary! Just wait till I sell my fall stock of foxes!"

Later, when tea was being served in the living-room, Nick announced he had learned, on a recent visit to the wireless station at Kodiak, that the fox-pirates in Southeastern Alaska were active again.

"When you begin to trap, Sasha, you'd better have Tynan and Side-money keep a sharp lookout on the outer beach of the Island. Just trust to Side-money—he knows this fox game from A to Z," Nick advised.

The trader also arranged to buy five pairs of Rocking Moon Blues to augment his stock on Oo-koon. His friendliness extended even to Gary, whom he invited to visit his ranch, stipulating, however, that he would himself take the cheechako there in a couple of weeks.

After bidding Nick good-bye, Sasha stood in the doorway watching him and Side-money walk down to the float where the *Seal Pup* lay rocking.

"Nicolai hasn't had one of his moody spells for a long time, Colonel Jeff," she called back over her shoulder. "He's getting positively angelic."

The Colonel, intent on the last stitches of Sampson's union-suit, grunted.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. He's up to something, for he brought me a power-of-attorney today, so I can act in all his affairs for him in his absence. Says he may take a trip after the first of the year."

Upstairs in her room Zoya was also watching Nick and Side-money as they stood on the float in earnest conversation. When the launch finally pulled out with the trader, she turned away. Then slowly as an old woman she walked to her little white bed and lay there with still, upturned face. Presently tears welled in her wide-open eyes to roll steadily, one after another across her cheeks, seeping along the beautiful tawny throat that Nicholas Nash had kissed.

On the afternoon following the trader's visit, the box-traps were put in readiness for the trapping and baited with food. The next morning when Sasha and her two assistants started out on the *Simmie and Ann* eager to see what the night's catch had been, the Colonel was loud in his lamentations because he could not go with them. But later he managed to hobble down on his crutches to welcome the returning launch as it came chugging importantly in with its after-deck loaded with cages of imprisoned foxes.

"A fox in every trap, Colonel!" Sasha exclaimed, springing from the deck to the float. "But Side-money selected only four to sell as breeding stock. See them!"

She indicated four boxes screened with wire netting, from which yellow eyes peered out sulkily.

The animals were taken to the large, wire-enclosed corral back of the barn, and liberated; but they trotted ceaselessly about their prison, poking their pointed noses into every corner and scratching frantically in their efforts to find a way to freedom. Side-money guffawed at the bewilderment of the beautiful, silky-coated creatures, but Sasha and Gary tried to soothe them with gentle words and coaxing sounds. They even placed the bored Alexander in the pen for half an hour, hoping that by some subtle method of fox communication the tamed animal might convey assurance to the wild things that had never before felt confinement.

That evening the family were all gathered in the living-room watching Alexander go through his tricks. Gary, boyishly proud of his way with animals, had added another act to the performance, with the assistance of Edgar Allan Poe, a blackbird, that had become so tame it traveled all over the Island on the young man's shoulder. How he had managed it remained a mystery, but now, when shown a piece of bread, the greedy Poe would flutter to where Alexander sat on his haunches waiting in dignified misery, and perch confidently on the fox's head. When the bird alighted, though Alexander's yellow eyes focused tensely on Gary, and he trembled with suppressed desires, he never tried to molest the trusting Poe.

Side-money, who openly longed for fox-nature to assert itself during this performance, watched until the completion of the act, and then announced his intention of going out to pay a last visit to the captives.

It was an hour before he returned. He walked over to Gary and dangled something before the young man's

face. "Say, Tynan," he drawled, "you better take better care of your watch. I found it out in the corral just a little while ago."

"Confound that strap," said Gary, running his fingers along the worn leather. "I'll have to see if I can't get it fixed in Rezanoff. Thanks, old man."

Side-money settled himself in a chair outside the circle of the lamplight and began unloading from his pockets the day's accumulation of shells.

"The tide was out," he informed them, polishing a limpet cone with the flat of his hand, "and I took a little hike down to Lampadny Point just to see how things are lookin'." He paused to rub a palm across his thick, blue lips. "An' what do you think? Some o' them goofy guys that's all the time a-prayin' to Tin Peters has gone and put an honest-to-God lamp with a reflector in that old bird's cupboard on the cross! Some style! Ha! Ha!"

"Do you mean the *lampada* of Father Paul?" Sasha asked.

"Uh-huh!" the man nodded. "But it ain't lit. Leastways it wasn't when I came along."

"Why, what a-an unpleasantly *modern* thing to do!" Sasha exclaimed.

"By the lord, I don't like it!" asserted the Colonel testily. "That Father Paul business was all right before Rocking Moon became a fox-ranch, but if this was my island, Sasha, my dear, I'd have a sign put up now, as they have on all other fox-islands: NO TRESPASSING. I'll bet this is the only fur farm in Alaska that hasn't such a sign."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Colonel Jeff! Our people have been putting oil in Father Paul's lamp for nearly

a hundred years—and I couldn't change the old custom now. Besides, I'm sure Dad wouldn't have me do it."

"If your Dad were here, it'd be all right. He's got the whole country eating out of his hand—but . . ." He swept a match against the roughened surface of his old match-safe and applied the flame to the bowl of his pipe, puffing fiercely.

No one said anything more about the *lampada* and the talk soon drifted to the foxes. Before bedtime it was decided that a few days should elapse before any more were trapped.

The quiet of the still, cold Alaskan night had settled down on the house and Sasha had been asleep an hour when the door of her room opened cautiously and into the moonlit dimness came the tall figure of Zoya. She was fully dressed, but her slippered feet made no sound on the floor. She stood a moment looking at the sleeping girl lying in her narrow, white bed, bronzed hair a touseled, silken mass about her pillowed head, one arm outstretched on the coverlet with the fingers curling into the palm. Then she went softly to the bedside and knelt down, placing a tear-wet cheek against the counterpane near Sasha's hand. There was devotion and a hopeless sadness in the action.

The little clock on the table ticked away five minutes before she stirred. With a movement so slow it was scarcely perceptible, she kissed the bare arm of the sleeping girl. As silently as she had come, she slipped away, closing the door gently behind her.

Morning came with its round of activities—a dark morning of late October. Gary and Side-money built

the fires at the house and passed on to the work in the lantern-lighted barn. The Colonel on his crutches, thumped downstairs to his comfortable chair by the crackling hearth-fire. Sasha came singing from her room to the kitchen door, and opened it to stand in muted surprise on the threshold.

Zoya was not there. Neither was there any sign of breakfast preparations. In the clean warmth of the quiet room the snapping of the fire in the range sounded louder than usual, and the morning lamp-light fell on rows of copper pots and pans hanging in their places. The silence, the undisturbed condition of the shining cooking utensils, were somehow disquieting. The girl looked quickly about her and went to the door of the living-room.

"Zoya?" she called, with a rising inflection.

"She's not down yet, my dear!" boomed the Colonel.

With concern on her face Sasha ascended the stairs and opened the door of the creole's room. She paused inside, her hands clasped, surprise, apprehension clouding her eyes.

Pillow and counterpane on the bed were smooth, undisturbed.

"Zoya! . . . Zoya!" The name came huskily, almost in a whisper as Sasha stepped across the room. Here and there she ran looking into the closet, under the bed, everywhere a person might hide.

"Zoya?" There was alarm in her voice as she opened the door of Seenia's room and called.

"She is not come in here yet," answered the old woman.

Sasha ran down to the kitchen again, and finding it still ominously empty, plunged out into the dim, cold

light of morning, to the pathway that led to the barn.

Half way through the leafless grove she met Gary She grasped him by both arms, looking up into his face with wide, fearful eyes.

"Oh, Gary, Gary!" she gasped. "I—I can't find Zoya anywhere! I'm afraid something has happened to her!"

CHAPTER XV

HOURS later, after every part of the Island had been searched both by circling it in the launch and by going over the trails, this fear became a certainty. There was no trace of the girl. She had disappeared in complete mystery. Not a single trinket was missing from her room; none of her clothes were gone, except those she had worn the day before, and her scarlet cap and sweater. Owing to an extremely high tide no footprints were visible anywhere on the beach. No one had heard a launch in the night—not even Seenia, who was a light sleeper. The only possible explanation of Zoya's disappearance was that she might have gone for a walk to the Lookout and accidentally fallen off the cliff.

Sasha, thinking this over, began to wonder if such a fall would be accidental. She recalled the night in her room when Zoya had acted so strangely. Could it be that the girl had fallen hopelessly in love with some white man? Was that the reason for her sadness lately? She reproached herself now with remorseful tears. Why had she not taken more trouble to win Zoya's confidence?

As she went over the incidents of the last few weeks the conviction grew upon her that Zoya was unhappily in love. But with whom? Gary? Side-money? . . .

Nicolai? These were the only men the creole saw since coming to live on Rocking Moon. Slowly the unhappy Sasha discarded the first two as possibilities. But Nicolai? Could this be the reason for Nicolai's change of manner toward the creole girl?

Suddenly Sasha saw the trader's actions in the light of this understanding. Nick must have sensed Zoya's growing affection for him, and—honest old Nick—he had tried to discourage her by his indifference. Poor Zoya! Had her secret grief unsettled her mind? Had it driven her out in the night to leap deliberately off the cliff when the tide was high, and was her body even now floating out to sea?

Sasha said nothing to the Colonel of this fear, but she confided to Gary—without giving her reasons. The young man was as puzzled and fearful as the girl, though he tried to comfort her with the suggestion that Zoya had gone to the mainland to her mother with a passing fisherman—or possibly with Nicholas Nash. But why had she gone secretly and at night? They decided to go to Rezanoff and find out.

The *Simmie and Ann* was in readiness for the trip when the *Seal Pup* snorted into the bay. Nick's appearance just then, and his astonished concern at the news of Zoya's disappearance banished all hope of his having seen the girl. He was on his way from Ookoon to Rezanoff, but, looking down into Sasha's tear-stained face, he assured her that he would abandon all business to assist in the search. Because of his familiarity with the country and acquaintance with the fishermen and fox-ranchers, he would himself go to the various settlements nearby and see what he could learn of the missing girl. Accordingly, when the *Simmie and*

Ann headed for Rezanoff, the *Pup* turned toward the villages along the southern coast.

A week's fruitless searching and inquiry made the creole's death seem the only possible solution of the mystery, and against her will Sasha was forced to abandon the quest. One morning when the rose-tinted dawn made her grief-worn face the paler for contrast, she set out from Rezanoff for home.

The burden of the household work, all of which now fell to her lot, was not so hard to bear as the weight of omission on her conscience. During her waking hours she continually searched her mind to see what she might have said or done to comfort the unhappy girl. If her father had been home, it could not have happened, she told herself, and found what comfort she could in preparing for his return. He was expected in Seward within two weeks, and from that town would take the *Starr* to Rezanoff.

Meanwhile the fox-trapping went on slowly. With the Colonel unable to move from his chair and Gary knowing nothing of foxes, Side-money's judgment was the deciding factor in the choice of breeding stock; and though many foxes were made captive in the box-traps, Side-money was so meticulously discriminating in his choice of those animals to be sold, that the *Simmie and Ann* seldom brought back more than four at a time.

Gary and the other man took turns patrolling the outer beach during each tide, according to Nash's suggestion. But no one was ever seen to land on the Island, nor were any tracks found, except their own. Sometimes a launch or a schooner was sighted far out, and an occasional fishing boat anchored off shore, as the herring run had begun late in the year.

One evening Gary, with his sleeves rolled up and one of Zoya's aprons tied about him, was in the kitchen helping Sasha prepare the supper, when Side-money came in with half a halibut. It had been given him, he said, by the owner of a herring-boat, who had come ashore on the north end of Rocking Moon for water.

Sasha and Gary were in better spirits than they had been for some time, because of the fifty foxes that were milling about in the corral back of the barn.

"Only ten more to get, Sasha," he informed her, stabbing a fork into a potato to test it. "By the time your Dad gets here—" he broke off to concentrate on the pot as he walked awkwardly, apron flapping about his high boots, to drain the steaming water into the sink. "—by the time your Dad gets here—let's see, he ought to be arriving in a week now if he makes connections—we'll have the stage all set for the buyers!"

"I shall certainly be relieved when all the foxes are safely turned over to their new owners!" exclaimed the girl, stopping on her way to the table with a platter of browned halibut steaks in her hands. "Gary—" she looked up at him with a sly little smile, "I wouldn't tell Nicolai this for the world, but sometimes I think I'm not exactly suited for a business life. You know I'm thankful that I'll soon be sharing this responsibility with Dad! . . . But don't you dare tell!"

Before sitting down to the table she went to the door and called Alexander, returning after a moment with a ruffled brow. "I can't imagine where that little rascal is," she said as she seated herself. "I've called him several times this afternoon, but he hasn't come in."

When Toyon Lake first froze over, Sasha and Gary had talked of skating on it by moonlight, and the young man had even gathered logs for a bonfire, but Zoya's disappearance had put pleasure from their minds for a time. The first snowfall, expected any time, would put an end to the skating, and during supper Gary mentioned this. Colonel Jeff and Side-money volunteered to wash the dishes so that the other two might have a free evening to skate.

"Sasha, my dear, the exercise will do you good," the Colonel urged. "You've been indoors too much lately—entirely too much."

The girl eventually yielded and went off to dress, appearing half an hour later like a snow-sprite in white wool knickers and mackinaw. As she waited on the veranda for Gary to bring the skates from the shed, she made a megaphone of her mittened hands and sent out another call for Alexander.

"I've never known him to stay away from home a whole day before," she worried, as the man appeared a few minutes later. "Could it be that he's caught in a box-trap?"

"Oh, no!" Gary swung the clinking skates over his shoulder. "We didn't set the traps last night, you know. He'll come poking 'round the lake when we begin to skate."

They started off through the strangely radiant Northern night under stars that mocked and danced through the pale awakening flushes of the aurora. The air, fresh and incredibly pure, stung pleasantly in their nostrils as they walked single file along the hard frozen trail through yellowed, flattened grass glinting with frost. To the left lay the bay, inky, smooth, yet

shimmering with reflections from the sky. Into the darkness of the forest they passed, and Sasha dropped back to walk side by side with Gary beneath the thick branches that shut out the light of the stars as effectively as the vault of a cave. In the path of the flashlight great gray trunks of trees leaped at them from the pungent gloom. The muted sound of the sea came sighing in from the outer beach. Occasionally a cone thudded to the ground, and once a branch cracked sharply like the report of a small rifle.

But it was light again when they came out on the low bank of the Lake where the wood lay piled for the bonfire. Under the stars the long stretch of ice glittered like crystal bordered by the shadowy black and silver of the forest along the shores. Their breathing sent little clouds of vapor before them as they busied themselves with the fire.

The flames leaped high over the crackling logs, and momentary bursts of light flashed on the scene around them, driving the shadows into the forest at their backs. After her skates were fastened Sasha stood erect, her hands in the pockets of her mackinaw, her stocking-cap dangling a fat tassel over her eyes as she looked down on Gary, busy with his skates.

"Let's not do any fancy skating tonight, Gary," she suggested as she held out a hand to assist him to rise. This was one of the things about her which he found both absurd and lovable; small as she was, Sasha always insisted on helping everyone, man or woman, and in return she expected their co-operation in whatever she happened to be doing. To the little Alaskan there was no such thing as "woman's" work and "man's" work. It was all "our" work. He had at first been somewhat

embarrassed by her astonishing offers of assistance. Now he had come to accept them without protest, but always with a warming tenderness for this naïve companion who, though a woman, still retained much of the graciousness and simplicity that marks the child.

"Night is the time for skating that is simple, and straight and swift," she explained. "It makes you feel as if you were flying then. . . . Come, you Man of the South!" She grasped his hands and smiled up at him, "Come, and I'll show you the way to the Northern Lights!"

Overhead the night-blue was frosted with glittering stars, but in the North toward which they glided, the aurora had already begun its mysterious, pulsing saraband of color.

In silence their long, swinging strokes carried them over the ice. Gary felt the wonder of perfect rhythm, perfect freedom, perfect companionship; a delight in the swift flying shadows along the shores, the ring of skates, and the cold, pure air breaking against his face. From far down the Lake above a ragged line of trees the magnetic North was beckoning. It seemed to him that he and the girl were speeding through ether spaces toward that evanescent radiance which grew into Polar hues. Beryl and amber, violet and rose, cardinal and silver tiptoed toward the zenith . . . merged into ghostly oriflammes, then serpentined in mad revelry across the sky. It was a display splendid, immense, but so silent that Gary found his ears aching to catch the inaudible music of the spheres. Then, of a sudden, the whole luminous shimmer stood still. The space of a breath, and it slowly flickered down to a glimmer of ivory mist through which the pale stars shone.

"Oh-o-o!" Sasha's low voice sounded as if she had come a long way down to earth. "Come, Gary. Let's skate back before it begins over again."

Half an hour later they rested on a log before the bonfire. Gary found himself watching the girl beside him as alternate bursts of golden light played over her. Seen thus she had that elusive touch of mystery that has made woman an unanswered question to man ever since the world began. As if his concentrated gaze had penetrated her thoughts she suddenly raised her eyes from the heart of the fire and smiled at him in such a friendly, intimate way that he found his heart beating faster. His mind reverted to the remark earlier in the evening concerning her father's arrival. He wondered if the advent of Father Anton would make any change in their lives, in their companionship.

He had always been a rover in his own land, until the war took him to foreign countries. He had known many women, alluring, lovable women, but whenever his freedom was threatened by matrimonial symptoms on his part, he had gone on to forgetfulness with little trouble. Marriage would mean settling down, a deadening thing for which he had no wish. But, it seemed to him, matrimony with Sasha would be loosed of its chains. She was one of those rare women a man wanted to take with him on joyful, care-free wanderings into the highways and byways of the world. Often when he was jaunting about the Island with her, afoot or afloat, he felt impelled to quote to her the lines that always came to him:

Two together!
Winds blow South, or winds blow North,

Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.

But he had never done it. He had no right to say anything to a woman which might lead to love. He had nothing to offer. Aimlessly, it seemed to him, he had been drifting along during these weeks at Rocking Moon, content to be a part of the fascinating, homely life of the farm, almost without thought of the future. Yet, had he been so entirely aimless? he asked himself. Some good had come to him, for no longer did the horrible figures with oozing wounds rise from his subconscious mind to harrow him, and under his mental lethargy he was vaguely aware that his spirit was groping its way through the fog, which lifted sometimes for a single, dazzling second, as it had tonight when he was skating toward the Polar lights—lifted, giving him a thrilling sense of greater vision, a feeling of elemental power, before it closed down again. Some day this mist must clear away forever, and when it did, when he felt again the ability to create, to write, he would

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Sasha's soft, husky voice broke the stillness.

"Tonight it seems as if we are the only two in all the wide, mysterious world," she said wonderingly. "Tonight, Gary, we are comrades of the Infinite." She tilted her chin to watch the sky where the lights were again at their quiet, colorful beckoning. "Tell me some of the ponderous thoughts that are keeping you so silent."

There was a pause before he answered, then he spoke slowly as if he selected the words carefully before

forming them. "I was thinking of all this, Sasha—the woods and the sea and the last few weeks up here. It's so utterly different from anything I've ever known. The country—" He stopped. A sudden flash of self-analysis told him that his enthusiasm for the country was colored, inspired, by his thoughts of her. He knew that the night, without her, would lose its soul. It would be beautiful—but awesomely lonely in its cold brilliancy,—a dying bonfire on the shores of a frozen lake, backed by the black-shadowed forest. It was the glamour of her nearness that made it magical for him.

Her voice recalled him: "Yes? I am listening, Gary." She leaned over and placed a mittened hand lightly on his knee. "I like to hear you say beautiful things about my country—for then I know you will be staying long among us."

With any other girl he would have covered the hand with his own, but now, because he wanted to do it more than anything else in the world, he sat passive, outwardly, though the perilously sweet consciousness of it caused him to stammer as he asked:

"Do—do *you* want me to stay long, Sasha?"

"Yes." In the starlight her eyes looked into his. "I like you, Gary." Then, as if she read something of his feeling for her, she became conscious of her hand, withdrew it and rose quickly.

"Wait a minute, Sasha!" He sprang up impetuously. "I—I'm going to tell you something—whether I ought to or not." He put both hands on her shoulders and looked down at her. "Sasha——"

Cutting off his declaration came a shrill, thin cry that sifted out from the gloom of the trees. They started and drew apart, turning startled eyes toward that shore

nearest the outer beach. Again came the sound, nearer, nearer, sharp and agonized from the cavernous shadows. Then, grotesquely into the dimly lighted spaces of the ice, staggered a small black creature. It hobbled a pace or two and fell. A moment later it raised itself and came on, only to fall again and lie still. With one accord Gary and the Girl skated toward it.

"A wounded fox," hazarded the man, speeding ahead of Sasha to ward off possible danger.

But the girl refused to be outdistanced. She reached the fox as soon as Gary and before he could prevent her, fell on her knees beside it, giving way to a startled cry of recognition.

"Why—Alexander! It's my Alexander!" her anguished voice rang out. "What's the matter with my little one?"

The blue fox looked up at his mistress with eyes that were glazed with pain. Then he dragged himself slowly erect, his great plumy tail sweeping the ice. He was standing on three legs. His right foreleg, a footless stump, was dripping darkly, forming a little pool below.

At Sasha's cry of pity and horror, Gary gathered the suffering animal tenderly in his arms, and began skating to the shore. . . .

An hour later Alexander, with bandaged leg, was lying on the couch before the fireplace, with all the members of the household, except Side-money, in sympathetic attendance. Gary's slight knowledge of surgery acquired during the war had enabled him to make the animal fairly comfortable.

He was carrying a basin of warm water back to the kitchen when Colonel Jeff waylaid him.

"My boy," the Colonel cast a cautious eye around to make sure they were alone, then, emphasizing his remarks with a forefinger tapping against Gary's chest he continued: "Don't mention this to Sasha, but it looks to me as if Alexander had been caught in a steel trap, and the plucky little devil has gnawed his foot off to get away. If so—it means but one thing, son. We've got poachers on the Island."

"Poachers—" the younger man was beginning, when the door opened and Sasha called:

"Nicolai is coming! I just heard the *Pup* at the float and saw the lights bobbing. He must be bringing news of Dad's steamer, for he said he'd pass the wireless station at Kodiak today." She ran back to the living-room.

"I'll talk to you about this later on, Gary," the Colonel whispered. "We'll ask Nick what he's heard about fox-pirates lately. He'll know."

Quick footsteps sounded on the porch and Sasha opened the door.

"Why Nicolai! What's the matter?" she cried as he came into the room. His face wore such a subdued and serious expression that the air was instantly charged with foreboding. "Has—has anything happened?"

Nick cleared his throat and looked nervously about him. "I just got in from Kodiak," he said. "The wireless picked up—well, you see they've been having a lot of fog along the southeastern coast lately," he went on, halting between the words. "They . . . Sasha—" he took a step toward her. "Sasha, the steamer your father is on is—sinking off Cape Yakatag!"

CHAPTER XVI

"STEAMER . . . sinking . . ." For a moment the words conveyed no meaning to Sasha's stunned consciousness. "Sinking . . ." she repeated dully.

Her father sinking off that lonely, glacier-walled coast, shunned even by the Indians! Her father's white head going down in the awful, blue-black sea that hurled itself eternally against the reefs of Cape Yakatag! She looked up with such a pale, shocked face that the Colonel started to hobble toward her. It served to break her stupor. She waved him away and her next words came in a pleading, pitiful tone that brought a mist to the old man's eyes. "My father shipwrecked—Oh, no, Nicolai. Oh, no, no——"

She stood holding tensely to her self-control while Nick told what information he had been able to obtain. He had gone to the wireless station, sixty miles away, to send a message when the news had come. The steamer *Northwestern,* southbound, was steaming full speed for the scene of the disaster, but the last radiogram from the doomed ship reported it slipping off the reef where it had struck.

"Never fear, Sasha, they'll have time to launch the life-boats and get the passengers off," asserted the

Colonel with forced confidence, as he hobbled over to pat the girl's arm.

"But I must know! I must know tonight!" She went to the window and looked down to the float where the *Seal Pup's* lights glowed. "Nicolai, your launch is faster than mine. You shall take me to Kodiak tonight where I can get in touch with the *Northwestern.*" She turned decisively to the trader. "I'll be ready in half an hour."

She was hurrying to the door of her room opening off the living-room, oblivious of everything but her father's peril, when she paused. There was the problem of Rocking Moon to consider. Impulsively she turned to look at Gary standing by the fireplace. Across the width of the room his gaze gripped hers as if he had taken her trembling hands in his firm, warm clasp. In his quiet voice came the answer to the question he read in her face.

"It's all right, Sasha. I'll look after the ranch while you're away." The two of them stood for a moment as if there were none but themselves in the room, a sight that tightened Nick's jaw muscles and set his eyes to smoldering.

Gary continued, with a quick unreadable glance in the direction of Side-money just entering from the rear: "Perhaps it might be well to send Feodor over from Rezanoff, even if he can't do much with his arm."

Sasha considered this. "Yes," she decided. "When Side-money takes feed to the feeding-stations to-morrow, he can run on over and get Feodor."

Preparations for Sasha's departure went on swiftly. Nick's news broke up the small family on Rocking Moon, for it was necessary to take the helpless old

Seenia to the village to stay with Feodor's mother during the two days Sasha expected to be absent; and Colonel Jeff, despite his rheumatism, insisted on accompanying the girl to Kodiak.

At midnight, just before the *Seal Pup* cast off from the float, Sasha handed Gary a list of the expected fox buyers. "If any of them come," she said, "tell them to return in a week's time."

She stepped over the railing of the *Pup* and a moment later the arrogant *put-put-put* punctured the cold brilliancy of the night as the launch shot away from the shore.

"Weather's going to cloud up. Smells like snow," Colonel Jeff addressed the wrapped figure that was Seenia, as he put coal into the tiny galley stove aboard the *Pup.* Then he called up to Sasha: "You'd better come down here and try to sleep until we get to town, my dear!" But the girl, standing in the bow of the boat, did not hear him, nor the anxious voice from the wheel-house where Nick stood.

With the steady soothing throb of the engine a queer numbness crept over Sasha. She did not feel the cold. She was not even conscious of having a thought. It was not until Windward Island lay behind under the stars that she became aware that Nicolai had left the wheel to the Colonel's care, and was standing by her side. He was silent, and she was grateful to him for being so. She found more comfort and assurance in his physical nearness, than she could have in any words he might speak. As the boat rocked beneath them, his tall figure swung into balance easily, surely. She knew that even now in this time of terrible anxiety, he was pleasantly alive to the speed of his

launch, to the rise and fall on the dim waves, and to his own mastery of this sea that drowned less daring men. She began to feel glad that she could turn over to him all the details of the arrangements at the village.

They reached Rezanoff to find that Feodor, whose arm was nearly well, had gone to a hamlet to the Westward in response to a rumor which he thought might lead to news of Zoya. But Sasha was not greatly concerned: Nicolai assured her he would send another man over to Rocking Moon to help Gary and Sidemoney—Nicolai attended to everything.

He did it with more than his customary dispatch, and scarcely an hour elapsed between the arrival of the *Seal Pup* at Rezanoff and the departure for Kodiak, even though he spent fifteen minutes talking earnestly to the engineer on one of his launches just in from Oo-koon.

As the *Pup* headed out across the long miles of open sea that lay between the two villages, Sasha, feeling in some way that it brought the wireless station nearer, went forward again as far as she could. She stood looking up at the sky where thin clouds were now sailing across patches of great Northern stars. Was it up there that souls went—up among the icy, glittering stars?

"I'm dreaming all this," she told herself. "I'm dreaming that Dad is shipwrecked and that I'm going to try and get word of him."

It was extraordinarily like a dream, this driving swiftly over the ground swells—huge, grey-green in the dim first hours of the morning; swells rolling in from the "sea of unshovell'd yet always ready graves!"

She shook her head to banish that gloomy line which had lodged in her mind at some long-ago reading. Even now she did not want to think of the ocean that way. The Larianoffs had always lived and dared upon the sea, and it had always proved a friend. Its storms had beaten upon their roofs, and tossed their ships, but none of them had met death because of it. On the contrary, the sea had given them food and riches. In this land where not a single roadway lined the contours of the hills, the ocean was the highway over which Larianoff men went out to adventure and romance and over which they came back again with marvelous tales of the world, with chests of books and music, beautiful cloth, and silver and linen. All the good things of life came to the Larianoffs by way of the sea. Could it turn against her now and bring death to her father, who loved the warmth and light of life, who loved people and the work he could do for them? Her father who was the last of the Larianoff men? As if the sea might answer her she turned her intent gaze on the unbroken swells that rolled away to the wan, gray dawn.

The immensity of the pelagic wilderness numbed her; but with a queer, detached attention to detail, she watched the glistening, gray-black hump of a whale rise and sink with clock-like regularity. . . . Snow began to sift down—tiny, almost imperceptible flakes that melted the instant they touched her cheeks. The whale was close under the lee now. It sank, its flukes slipping with a vast laziness into the cold waves . . . It rose again with a sonorous whistle, sending up a thin jet of vapor. She found a faint envy stirring in her heart because of the ease and certitude the creature

displayed in this ocean which could so easily snuff out a man's life. Then, gradually, in a way utterly without reason or logic, she began to feel that this tremendous, watery element was neither good nor bad. She began to see it as a great impersonal force that man might use for his benefit or for his destruction. For one ignorant of its laws, it proved a grave, but to him who loved it, who knew its laws and obeyed them, it could be the means of bearing him to safety, to happiness. The Larianoffs were such men. Her father was such a man. He, in his frail bidarka, had often plunged fearlessly through the vortex of a storm to take the last sacrament to a dying member of the Church. Could he not, when the ship slipped from the reef at Cape Yakatag, use his inborn and acquired knowledge of the sea to bring himself, as well as others, to safety?

This thought brought such a sense of comfort, of confidence, that when the dim morning light revealed the tall masts of the radio station pricking up from the forest, she had almost persuaded herself her father was safe.

As the *Seal Pup* chugged swiftly through the rock-bordered channel leading to the station dock, it began to snow in earnest—great heavy flakes that turned slowly as they came down to melt in the gray-green water. The launch made a landing and a few minutes later Sasha was walking through the dense atmosphere toward the blurred silhouettes of buildings, where faint, yellow squares marked the morning-lighted windows.

It continued to snow all during the anxious, dreary day at the Government station where they waited in

vain for more news from the *Northwestern*. The last message had announced its position fifty miles west of Cape Yakatag. Since then, though every radio station on the coast was sending out calls, so the operator assured them, there had been no response.

It was twelve hours after the arrival of the *Seal Pup* that the messages began to come through. Sasha, worn from wakefulness and anxiety, could hardly distinguish the words of the radiogram Nick handed her—a message, which if it had followed the ordinary course of transmittal in that part of the country, would have been sent by launch from Kodiak to her at Rocking Moon.

Gradually, from blurred type, the words that had ridden seven hundred miles of ether waves began to stand out clear, black:

ALL PASSENGERS SAFE AND WELL. LANDED AT JUNEAU ON NORTHWESTERN. WILL BE HOME NEXT STEAMER.

DAD

"Dad!" she repeated, holding the paper against her face. After the tension of the past hours, and the long contemplation of his possible death, the sight of that homely little word filled her with a surge of warmth and comfort. It radiated safety, cheerfulness, the old established order of happiness that was always present when her father was with her. "Dad!"

Thrusting the message into Colonel Jeff's waiting hand she laid her head on her arms upon the table, and cried for the first time since the news of the wreck had reached her.

The Colonel, stricken with silence for the moment, leaned over and patted her clumsily.

Darkness had fallen, but Sasha, tired as she was, made ready to start for home immediately. Half an hour later, with her cap and coat on, she met Nicholas Nash as he came in from outdoors.

"When do we start, Nicolai?"

"Great Scott! Sasha, you don't expect to go home tonight, do you?" He looked at her in perturbed surprise. "Why, you must be dead for sleep—I know I am." He passed a lean brown hand over his eyes with a gesture that somehow lacked conviction because he had put in five hours of slumber in one of the operator's bunks that afternoon. Sasha, unaware of this, was all contrition.

"Oh, poor boy! I'm a selfish old thing not to remember that you've been up far longer than I. But Nicolai—" she came close, looking up eagerly into his heavy-lidded eyes as she patted his coat sleeves; "I'll take the wheel of the *Pup* tonight—it's stopped snowing and the stars are out, so I'll have no trouble. Besides, I can steer by the compass most of the way, and you can sleep until we get to Rocking Moon, if you want to. Please let's start now, Nick! Shall we? Oh, tonight I feel like racing over the sea to the end of the world, I'm so happy!" She stepped back and flung out her arms. "I'm so *happy*, Nicolai!" The movement of her head set the tassel on her cap dancing above her glowing amber eyes.

The trader looked at her for a long, contemplative moment. "W-e-l-l," he considered, drawing his watch from his pocket. "It's eight-thirty now." There was a hint of the sardonic in his smile when he nodded

and continued: "All right, Sasha. All right. This is not the first time you've kept me from sleeping, you little witch. We'll start for Rocking Moon—just as soon as I get the engine to turning over."

But the *Seal Pup's* engine chose this time, apparently, to exhibit temperament. It refused to "turn over" despite the muttered encouragement—or disparagement of Nash working away on the other side of the thin partition that separated him from the tiny cabin where Sasha and the Colonel were established. That the perfect mechanism of the *Pup* should refuse to work was a distinct surprise to both of them.

After a while the girl grew sleepy and curled herself up in the top bunk while Colonel Jeff, after making a roaring fire in the galley stove, put on a pot of coffee. The last thing Sasha remembered, as she drowsily pulled a robe over her, was the aroma of boiling coffee and the asthmatic, ineffectual cough of the engine.

When she woke, the steady vibration and the rocking told her that the launch was under way. She leaned her tousled head over the edge of the bunk. The clock ticked loudly that it was an hour after midnight. From the bunk below came the Colonel's gentle snore, an accompaniment to the faint *creak-creak* of the steering gear.

Descending cautiously so as not to awaken the sleeper, she stepped up into the darkened wheel-house where Nick stood, a tall, slim silhouette against the dim light beyond the open window. Fresh, cool air from illimitable stretches of ocean drifted past him, and his hands rested lightly on the wheel as he watched the *Seal Pup's* prow lift and fall on long, slow swells

glimmering like polished onyx under the light of Northern stars.

"Oh, Nick! Why didn't you wake me when we started?" She pictured him standing there alone during the long hours when, if it had not been for her desire to reach home, he might have been sleeping comfortably at the radio station.

He turned toward her.

"Hello, there, Sasha!" His cheerful greeting surprised the girl, for the Nicolai she had known all her life was apt to be sulky after condescending to do the thing he did not want to do. His manner now enhanced his action immeasurably, forcing her to feel a sense of gratitude all out of proportion to the value of it. No one knew this better than Sasha, and though she was provoked at herself, there was more than a hint of compunction in her manner as she impulsively laid her warm, supple hands over his larger ones that grasped the spokes of the wheel.

"I'm quarter-master now, Nick." She shoved him gently aside. "You go and lie down, please. I feel like a wretch, making you travel all night like this."

He looked down at her as if he found her lovable but absurd in her attempt to do a man's work for him. Then with one hand he caught both her wrists.

"Slap! Slap!" he said with mock ferocity, administering two quick strokes on her palms. "Don't you know people get put in irons for trying to run a ship against the captain's orders?" Then he continued in his natural tones; "But I'll tell you what you *can* do, Sasha. You can stay here and talk to me. We've got a long run ahead of us, as I didn't get away from

the station until half an hour ago. The engine—but let's forget it. Here—let me fix this stool for you to sit on." He moved the high seat over to his companion. "Gee! but this is great, Sasha!" he exclaimed, after she had perched herself upon it. "It's about the only time within the memory of man that you haven't either been fighting with me, or badgering me!"

Sasha laughed happily. Now that her mind was at ease about her father, she was keenly alive to the magic of the night, the easy, undulating movement of the launch under the waves, and Nick's astonishing, cheerful kindliness. For the first time since she had repulsed his rough advances that August day by the Lookout tower, she became herself with him.

After a while they drifted into talk of her father and the wreck; of the old days when Nick's grandfather on his mother's side had been a commander in the Russian fleet of commerce, and Sasha's had eloped with a captain's daughter at Sitka. They talked of Alaskan things—of their homeland, which both knew so well; things that the girl loved wholeheartedly, but that Nick regarded with an affection which was divided and tinged with scorn for the provincial.

As they talked in the dim wheel-house Nick's thoughts went South again to a far city which he idealized now because of his absence from it. He told Sasha of its charm, its wealth, the beauty of its women, and tonight the girl listened with wide, wondering eyes. He liked to tell Sasha about the world —when she was sweet and attentive. Though in his ill-natured moods he often said things to her which

carried a hint of scornful pity because she had never been out of Alaska, secretly he was pleased to have her know so little of the land to the South. To his mind a girl—the girl who was to be Mrs. Nicholas Nash—should know nothing of it outside of that he himself wished to tell her or to show her. It made him feel more masterful, and there were few times when Sasha allowed him to feel so in her presence—Sasha, with her banter, and her impudent, piquant little ways.

Nicholas Nash, of the ardent, short-lived emotions, could never remain in love with a woman he saw every day, yet he believed, for the time being at least, that he could never tire of Sasha. But—if the golden glamour did fade after possession, she still had that inherent cleanness, that vigor and freedom of the North that would always appeal to him. And she would be the beautiful mistress of his home and the mother of his children. These were the comforts of a sated old age that Nicolai looked forward to across a delirious whirl of wild and pleasurable years.

"Poor fellow!" Sasha knew nothing of these mental processes, but she laughed sympathetically after he had finished a tale of San Francisco. "You're always wanting to be where you are not and longing for the things you can't have, Nick!"

"But I *can* have you, Sasha!"

One step from the wheel brought him against the high stool on which she sat. She became aware of a faint aroma of clean wool and expensive cigarettes. In the dusk his face was close to hers, and for the first time in her life she felt the magnetic quality of his somnolent eyes. There was a startled moment

when she found herself unable to look away, a moment when the compelling power of him drew her body involuntarily. Slight as the movement was, the man saw it and his caution burst all bonds. Leaving the launch to drift where it would, he caught her to him and buried his face in her wind-blown hair.

For an instant astonishment held the girl passive, then she roused to struggling indignation.

"Nick—let me go—How dare you, Nick——"

The words were smothered on her lips by the man's warm mouth. All restraint had fled from him now. Sasha knew a throb of fear mingled strangely with a flaming sense of his nearness. This Nick was foreign to her—a Nick beyond reasoning, driven mad with the desire he had crushed for months. The Nick who had embraced her against her will on the Lookout last August was but a crude impetuous boy beside this man. His voice was thick, shaking to a passion she had never heard before.

"Sasha, you little devil—you elusive little devil—I tell you I'm crazy for you! By God, you're mine! I've wanted you all my life!" His clasp tightened and blindly his mouth again sought hers.

Blazing-eyed, she twisted her face away, her voice assuming a cool scorn contradicted by the wild beating of her heart; her hands pressing him off with all her strength.

"And I think I've hated you all my life!" she retorted furiously.

"I'd rather have you hate me than laugh at me, as you always have!" he was returning, when the girl found herself released so violently that she staggered and Nick had barely stepped to the wheel again when

she heard the fumbling his quick ear had caught before, and Colonel Jeff poked his head around the door jamb.

"How's she heading, Cap?" he asked cheerily. "Rocking Moon ought to be showing up pretty soon, eh?"

There was a long moment of silence before Nick's surly voice replied:

"Not yet a while. I'm cutting through the channel to Rezanoff first."

"Great Mahogany Ghost, Nick!" the Colonel shouted, glaring over his glasses. "What kind of a trick is that? Rocking Moon is fifteen miles this side of Rezanoff! By the lord, *I* want to get home and rub some oil of wintergreen on this confounded leg of mine!"

"Sorry, Colonel." Sasha alone understood the curtness of the other's voice. "Should have told me sooner. We're going to run in and have a bite of breakfast with Feodor's mother, pick up Seenia, and be on our way again."

The blundering Colonel, never guessing how inopportune had been his appearance, stared at the man at the wheel with open mouth.

Sasha would not turn around. She treated Nick to a view of her back while she looked angrily over the dim sea trying to still the beating of her heart. If Nick Nash thought she was going to beg him to take her straight home, he was vastly mistaken, she told herself, and she told herself, too, that she hated him for the way he had forgotten himself just now. But even as she thought it her blood tingled again to the rough impetuousness of his embrace. It was this very

savagery, this masterful barbarism which formed much of Nick's charm for women.

There must have been some hint of the tension in the air, for the Colonel, after a long stare, withdrew with offended precision. Then Sasha heard a step behind her and though she did not turn, nor did he lay a hand on her, she knew that Nick was close by her.

"Sasha—*lubimaya*—" his voice was low and pleading, yet still filled with the deeper timbre it had known a few minutes before, "Sasha—I forgot myself. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it, but—My God, Sasha, do you realize how I love you!"

She would have been less than woman if she could have withstood that. In a stiff little voice she answered him, and under the gradually warming friendliness they headed in across the Harbor of Rezanoff.

In the dim morning light the rolling white hills drew nearer, and the houses of the village gradually came forth as if an artist's invisible hand were touching them in against the soft, snowy background:—the dark bold strokes that were the wharf and weed-grown piles; the dull ivory and mauve smudged in to form the hewed-log walls under thick roofs of snow squared about the edges; the straight lines of blue smoke drifting up from the blurred scarlet of brick chimneys; the jade domes of the Church rounding from the highest white knoll; and, as if to accentuate the picture, the squares of dim orange here and there that were lighted windows.

There were several launches lying at the dock. From the open hatches and doors of the cabins breakfast savors of frying bacon and bubbling coffee

came out on the cold, fresh air. One of Nick's launches was in from Oo-koon and as he made a landing a hairy fellow, with uncombed head, bobbed up out of the hatchway to give him greeting.

It was quite daylight when the *Seal Pup,* with Seenia in the cabin, left for Rocking Moon. When the launch was moving away from the wharf Nick turned the wheel over to Sasha and stepped to the doorway of the wheel-house.

"I'll be over to Oo-koon tonight," he called a last word to the dark-browed fellow standing on the after-deck of his fox-island launch. "And in the meantime—" he made a motion with his hand—" you know what to do."

The *Pup* shot out over the bay, Sasha guiding it. Though she had been gone from home not quite thirty-six hours, it seemed like a month. She wondered how Alexander's maimed leg was getting on. Then her mind became busy planning improvements to be made at the ranch when she sold her foxes—a new engine for the *Simmie and Ann;* comforts for her father's room; new hangings for the living-room. Had any of the fox buyers arrived, she wondered, and if so, how had Gary handled them? She was glad to forget Nick in her thoughts of Gary. She visualized him now—the deep gray of his black-lashed eyes set close to his straight dark brows, and his way of looking down while he listened to her, a slow smile growing on his lips. She smiled at his boyish habit of bringing her wild flowers done into tight little bunches without a single redeeming green leaf, holding them close up under the blossoms. Her artistic soul stood aghast at the arrangement, but her heart always flooded with

warmth for him as she accepted them. She liked his manner with Colonel Jeff and Seenia, and the way he sat on the front steps with Alexander, his arm over the fox's back, his eyes quiet and introspective, looking out across the bay. Of course, he was by no means a perfect man—nor did she want him to be. He was moody at times, and thoroughly proficient in profanity, as she had ascertained once when she came upon him unawares while he labored at the engine of the *Simmie and Ann.* And though totally unmusical, his appreciation of music led him to sit down at the piano sometimes just when she wanted to read, and patiently, thoroughly and with maddening slowness, poke out an air from some obscure opera. She pictured him now, long legs wound backward about the base of the piano stool, dark head bent and one hand poised above the keyboard as he pursued his one-finger method. And once he had come back from Rezanoff with a black eye, the result of forcibly recovering the *Simmie and Ann's* skiff which had been spirited away by a light-fingered Swede fisherman.

She liked the hint of gray in his thick, black hair. Gary was like Nicolai, in that he was deep-chested, strong-limbed and possessed of untiring energy, yet Sasha always felt that he was not of the breed of men who delight primarily in action. He could enjoy gaiety and adventure without himself playing the leading part. She felt in him a spirit of detachment, as if he stood to one side, as it were, and watched life go by, and thought about it. She found this singularly restful after Nicolai's capably insolent way of dashing into things, utterly unable to see anyone's viewpoint but his own. If life were all high moments,

Nick could be a hero, because he plunged into every situation with little thought. Nick did things with the sweeping gesture, one eye always on the grandstand. But Gary—she wondered how he would meet the hazards of the North—if he stayed.

Engrossed in her meditations Sasha guided the *Seal Pup* through the maze of little islands that lay between Rezanoff and Rocking Moon. The sun was silvering the blue of the water and striking crystal radiances from the snow-laden spruce trees along the shore. She took a keen delight in standing back of the wheel, balancing herself to the tilt of the deck, feeling the vibration, watching the bow swing to her touch. Presently this pleasure became more engaging than her thoughts, and because the water was deep everywhere, she began making little experiments to see how quickly the *Pup* responded to its helm.

Nick came from the cabin and made his way to the bow of the boat, where he stood like a figure-head, lazily scanning the shores on each side. The launch, obedient to a turn of the wheel, swung wider than usual and before Sasha could bring back, Nick turned and came striding along the deck into the wheel-house. He reached for the control of the engine and slowed it down.

"Sasha, look in that little cove to the right. Isn't that the *Simmie and Ann?*"

"It *is!* What in the world is she doing anchored in there so far from home!" Sasha, puzzled, swung the *Pup* toward the other launch and in a few minutes was alongside.

There was no sign of life aboard the anchored craft. No one appeared in answer to Nick's shouts. The

wheel-house was empty; the doors all closed, and no smoke came from the short black pipe that protruded from the snowy top of the cabin.

"Oh, Side-money!" called the trader for the second time. "Tynan!"

Silence answered.

Both Nick and Sasha sprang aboard the *Simmie and Ann* and disappeared just as Colonel Jeff stuck his head out of the *Pup's* cabin door.

A few minutes later the girl came up alone onto the trampled snow of the *Simmie's* deck. Alarmed, her eyes once more swept the craft, and came back to rest on the Colonel's anxious face.

"Colonel Jeff," she said, "there isn't a soul on board."

CHAPTER XVII

NICK followed the girl to the deck of the *Simmie and Ann* almost immediately and stood wiping his hands on a piece of waste.

"Engine trouble," he announced briefly, as he tossed the waste overboard. "The *Simmie and Ann's* been bucking again, and the blamed fool who had her out has been tinkering with the thing until the parts are scattered all over. But he can't have been gone so very long, because there are still some embers left in the galley stove."

"Oh!" Sasha's expression was one of relief.

"Well," put in the Colonel testily, "this has all the earmarks of Side-money's work. I suppose he's taken the skiff and rowed home. Gary knows that engine like a mother knows her babe. He can always make her come to time."

"We might as well take her into the ranch, then, I reckon." Nick, with his air of capability, was already stepping about the snow-covered deck getting ready a tow-line.

A quarter of an hour later both launches, with the tow-rope tightening and slackening between them, were slipping over the smooth ground swells headed toward Rocking Moon. Intermittent breaths of cold wind crisped darting purple lines over the water, lines which zigzagged past them, leaving the sea glinting silver

again under the wintry sun. It was not long before Sasha, at the wheel of the *Pup,* sighted a small dark object rising and falling on the waves ahead of them. As she drew near it, this proved to be a skiff with Side-money, in mackinaw and fur cap, rowing mightily.

"By gosh, I'm glad to see you folks!" he burst out, as his stubby hands grasped the guard rail of the *Pup.* "I'm about tuckered out with them dummed oars—" He stood up on the deck and stamped his feet, his eyes roving over the launch. "Why—where's Nash?" he demanded suddenly.

"Back there steering the *Simmie and Ann*—can't you see?" Colonel Jeff cast a brief disparaging glance at the man.

"Here—you!" At that moment Nick from the towed launch, hailed Side-money in a peremptory voice that made the helper deaf to Sasha's inquiries.

"Haul away there on the tow-line! I want to talk to you!" ordered the trader. The man complied, putting off the Colonel's rapid questions with grunts and "Wait till I get this in, Colonel. Just hold your horses a minute, can't you?"

Nick leaped aboard, and plunged into the situation at once.

"What happened to you, man?" he demanded. "Can't you run a launch without laying it up for repairs?"

Side-money shot an oblique glance at Nick's scowling face. His own hairy countenance assumed an injured expression.

"That's right," he said plaintively. "Go after *me.* Put all the blame on *me.* I'm the fall guy, I am. Just as if *I* wanted the engine to go dead on me in the mid-

dle of a snow storm,—me floating about helpless on the bloody Pacific Ocean. Me living on fox grub, too, and nothing but snow-water to——"

"How long have you been gone from Rocking Moon, Side-money?" Sharply the Colonel cut off his jeremiad.

"Gosh, *I* don't know. I ain't got no watch. All I know is that I left about noon of the day you all started for Kodiak——"

"Nearly twenty-four hours!" broke in Sasha. "Why, Side-money—then you never went to Rezanoff for an extra man—and Gary has been alone on the Island all this time?"

"I didn't go nowheres, m'am—leastways, I don't know where I got. You see I starts out to feed the foxes, and was going to get Feodor, like you told me, and it was snowing thicker than hair on a dog's back, and the engine peters out on me and I drifts about —lord, I don't know how long, and then she quits snowing and I finds myself next to some land with everything covered with snow—trees, rocks, ground, *everything!* Gosh, I don't know where I am! I ain't never been in this part of the country when it snowed. Well, the tide drifts me into that little cove where you found the *Simmie*, and then I starts to work on the engine again."

"Yes, you certainly did," snorted Nick.

The man ignored the interruption.

"But I never gets a wheeze out of her. I could have fixed her up all right, but the coal gives out for the galley stove, and with this cold weather coming on I figured I'd better be rowing someplace. So I starts out thinking I'd strike a fishboat, or maybe a place

where I could get my bearings. Believe me, I'll never take a launch out again with no grub aboard!"

"And my foxes on the outer beach have been without food?" Sasha's voice was indignant.

"Oh, no, m'am. I put feed in the traps all right. It was only when I started for Rezanoff that I got lost."

The girl turned with an impatient gesture. "Come, let's hurry home, Nicolai. I'm—I'm worried."

"All right, Side-money, you take the wheel of the *Simmie*. I'll stay here."

A few minutes later they were again under way. Nick steered the *Seal Pup* now, and Sasha, with her elbows on the narrow sill, dropped her chin in her hands and looked thoughtfully ahead. A vague presentiment of more trouble was taking life in her mind. How had Gary managed alone on the Island?

Strong and trustworthy she believed him to be, but yet—at the back of her consciousness there now spoke the faintest voice of uncertainty. Hers was the Alaskan's attitude toward the capability of the cheechako, who has not yet had the opportunity of proving himself able to battle successfully with the North. It was a hitherto unconscious reservation which kept her from whole-heartedly depending on Gary—and she wanted to depend on him. She tried to banish the feeling by telling herself that he had "roughed it" in many countries of the world. He had read and traveled more than anyone she had ever known. Still—she could not rid herself of the idea that he was primarily a "city man." Attractive as he was in every other way, she knew that in the hazards of the North she would trust to her own judgment rather than his. She would

even trust to the judgment of Nicholas Nash, wild and reckless though she knew him to be.

These thoughts weighed on her. She told herself she was not in love with Gary but—she never allowed herself to think of the time when he should be gone from Rocking Moon.

Behind her Nick put the wheel over and she roused herself to find that the *Seal Pup* was snorting into the little home bay. Her eyes swept the waters ahead. The float lay barren and white on the sparkling blue. She could see a path shoveled out through the snow leading up to the house, which was wearing its white roof like a new turban. The forest behind was white too, except for dark green patches where the snow had fallen from the pendant branches. She expected any moment to see Gary run out on the veranda and down to the float.

But as the *Pup* drew nearer to the shore she became aware of a queer inactivity in the scene before her. No smoke rose from the wide red chimney of the ranch-house, nor from that of the barn. There was no sign of life anywhere.

When the two launches had been brought alongside the float and still no one had come down, Sasha's apprehension had grown into alarm. While Nick and Side-money assisted the Colonel and Seenia to the house, she ran ahead, her boots crunching the snowy path.

She stood on the veranda and called, a questioning note in her voice:

"Gary! . . . Gary! . . . We're home!"

There was no answer.

She turned the knob of the door and entered the

living-room. It was cold and deserted. After she had gone calling up and down stairs, she convinced herself that he was not in the house.

"Gary must be at the barn, or over on the other side of the Island," she told the others, as they came in the door. "Br-r-r-r! It's cold in here. Side-money, build up the fires, please." She drew out Seenia's chair and shook up the pillows before she established the old woman in it. "I'll be back in a few minutes, Seenia. I'm going to run out to the barn."

The bare branches of the alder grove were creaking in the rising wind as she hurried through them, but otherwise it was strangely still everywhere about the ranch. Not even a fox yelped from the corral. As she swung open the heavy barn door she wondered where Gary had put the wounded Alexander.

"Ga-r-y!" she called, and with her head on one side stood listening a moment before she advanced into the dusky interior. There was no sound.

When she stepped inside she was met by the pungent, homely smells of hay, the cow, and fox-food. She paused while the two great salmon vats took shape for her eyes that were filled with the brightness of snow and water, and the vague mass in the corner resolved itself into the brick stove where fox-food was cooked in a huge, imbedded iron kettle. She had never known it to be so still in the barn. Even the cow, who had large winter quarters on the other side of the partition, was quiet.

Just as she was turning to leave a movement in the darkest corner drew her attention; then, low in a bed of straw something heaved, broke in two and part of it advanced in her direction.

"Why, hello, Sampson!" Sasha exclaimed fondly.

The little animal, grotesque in his "outfit," tiptoed toward her on incredibly skinny legs and she caught him up in her arms. "What's the funny little thing doing with his overcoat all askew—" An impatient bark from the corner interrupted her. "Oh, my poor Alexander!" She ran to the straw where Alex stood waiting, his bandaged leg held out stiffly. The fox looked up with shining eyes, whining and letting out soft yelps of delight at her return. She sat down beside him, with the wriggling Sampson in her lap, while her favorite nuzzled his head contentedly under her chin.

Alex's actions convinced Sasha that his wounded leg was healing without complication and for a few minutes she cuddled both affectionate creatures, laughing and murmuring endearments into their soft ears, before she settled them again upon the straw. She was closing the barn door on them when Nick's call came to her from the veranda.

"Just a minute, Nicolai. I'll be there in a minute!" she answered, with a backward wave of her hand as she hurried over the trampled snow, her eyes seeking the corral.

None of her foxes were visible through the wire meshes of the enclosure. A queer chill swept over her as she shot the bolt on the door and went inside. For a moment she stood looking across the soiled snow; then in a panic she darted toward the wooden dens at the back of the corral.

Every den was empty!

She felt suddenly and deathly ill. "Oh-o-o . . . Oh-o-o . . ." her voice came in whispered gasps as her

unbelieving eyes again swept along the row of vacant dens. She did not see Nick standing in the doorway of the corral watching her. His face was as pale as her own, and it wore a strange look of mingled fear and compassion as he covered the distance between them.

Hesitatingly he laid a hand on her shoulder. "Sasha . . . Sasha . . ."

The girl breathed deeply, steadying herself. When she looked up there was a mist in her eyes and her chin quivered.

"They're gone, Nicolai . . . stolen." The words came quietly, but they were weighted with the crushing consciousness of disaster. A moment later, however, she squared her shoulders and spoke as the daughter of a race that considers it unsportsmanlike to dwell on financial loss. "But—but . . . I have still sixty foxes left on the other side of the island."

Not until the news had been broken to the Colonel was Gary Tynan mentioned. Side-money, standing by the mantel uneasily fingering one of his painted shells, was questioned, but could add nothing to his story already told on the launch. Colonel Jeff, with pursed lips and frowning brows, sat thinking, while Nick paced up and down the living-room, volubly planning the arrangement of his affairs so that he could go to Kodiak and report the theft to the nearest marshal.

"But Tynan ought to be here somewhere," he asserted in a tone that showed he refused to consider any other possibility. "He must have put up some sort of a fight to protect your property, Sasha, and in that case the pirates would have bound him and put him out of business until they finished their work.

Side-money, we'll go out to the barn and make a thorough search."

Side-money, after one of his quick, oblique glances at the trader, made for the back door.

Sasha watched the two men hurrying through the grove toward the barn to begin their search for Gary Tynan. While she waited for their return she fixed unseeing eyes on the gray wintry branches of the alders. She would not allow herself to think of possible danger to Gary, nor of the fifty stolen foxes that represented two years of sacrifice and hard work. Instead her thoughts went to the fox colonies on the outer beach of the Island, where, she estimated, she must have sixty animals left—fifty of which she had planned to keep for her own increase. But now . . . there was no other way out of it; she must sell them to pay her debts—the money borrowed from Nicolai, and the bills contracted for supplies at his store. Even then she would still be in his debt. She could not sell all her foxes—she must keep at least five pairs, including Alexander, if she would go on with her business. And she must go on.

Her heart sank as she contemplated beginning where she had begun two years ago. Just when she thought she should be free and financially independent, she must go back to the old ways of rigid economy; the buying on credit at the store; the burdening sense of her obligation to Nicolai. For a frightened moment she nearly lost faith in herself, and like many another woman venturing alone on the sea of business, longed poignantly for some man to whom she could turn over the wheel of her responsibilities. This instant of weakness was put to rout by her innate common sense, and she sternly

forced herself to consider what she had left to go on with. When Nicolai came in from the barn, she would accompany him and Side-money to the various feeding-stations. The traps must have been sprung hours ago, and the imprisoned foxes would now be undergoing discomfort in their narrow quarters.

As she thought, her eye noted the movement of the bare alders. The wind was rising, indicating a blow —one of the clear, cold kind that made the sea a bitter way to travel in winter.

Through the intersected branches she saw Nick and Side-money come out of the barn and pause uncertainly. Their figures were not clear but from the gesticulating of Nicolai's hands it was plain that he was disturbed, angry. Perhaps he was berating Side-money for leaving Gary alone on the Island. Sasha felt grateful to Nick for his whole-hearted sympathy in her misfortune, and somewhat surprised, also. He had never approved of her attempt at fox farming, and never before had she known him to have any sympathy with failure.

As he and Side-money came through the alders toward the house, Nick looked up at her window. He shook his head. He had not found Gary. Sasha had never seen him look so troubled.

Half an hour later the *Seal Pup* was on its way to the feeding-stations with Sasha and the two men on board. The cold wind had blown thin gashes of white across the blue of the sea and as the launch shot forward wavelets hit against the bow with vigorous, slapping sounds. Rounding Lampadny Point they ran into a flock of black sea-birds bobbing and rocking on the water. These scattered with fast beating wings, drag-

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ging their fat bodies along the wave-crests. Sasha stood in the wheel-house and with the binoculars swept the shores of Rocking Moon, in the hope that she might see Gary.

The low rolling dunes of the Point were covered with snow and an occasional tree stood out black-green against the white, like a pen and ink drawing. The glasses brought the tomb of Father Paul close with such suddenness that Sasha exclaimed involuntarily.

"Look, Nick!" she cried a second later. "There's a trail through the snow and it seems as if an army of people had been tramping about the tomb!"

The trader grasped the glasses and trained them on the great, three-barred cross. "By George, you're right, Sasha. Some one's been ashore there within the last twenty-four hours."

Side-money also had seen the trampled snow, for he walked hurriedly toward the bow and stood braced to the wind, the ear-laps of his cap fluttering about his face. He turned to look toward the wheel-house, and Nick motioned him inside.

"We'll go in closer and anchor, Side-money. You stay aboard. Sasha and I are going ashore to see what's up there."

The man's mouth fell open. "Gosh-a-mighty!" he exclaimed. "What'cha want to do that for? It's breezing up and we ought to get the feeding over as soon as we can. It's getting lumpy out here a'ready," he added, indicating the chop splashing against the boat.

Nick paid no attention, but slowed the *Pup's* engine. "Get for'ard and throw the hook!" he ordered.

Side-money, with displeasure written large on his

broad face, tossed the light anchor overboard, and a few minutes later stood watching the tiny skiff spank the water as Nick's powerful strokes sent it shoreward.

When the bow squashed into the sand, Sasha sprang out. While Nick arranged the oars and drew the little craft up on the beach she ran ahead along the path already made in the snow. Without waiting for him to assist her she scrambled to the top of the tomb and when he came up, she was opening the glass door of the *lampada.*

"Someone's had this new lamp burning, Nick. The wick is charred and the oil is gone. I wonder who put the horrid, reflecting thing here. Someway, I've never felt right about it. I'm not superstitious, but it seems as if all my bad luck began when Father Paul's old lamp was taken away."

"Nonsense, Sasha." Nick took the new lamp from her.

"Anyway, while we're here, I'm going to put the other one back, Nicolai. Before the snow came I saw it lying close to the end wall." She paused thoughtfully. "Whoever was here, came after we left the Island to go to Kodiak. There was no snow when we left, you remember."

Nick nodded, a frown drawing his light, clean-cut eyebrows together. "Yes, I said they must have come ashore within the last twenty-four hours," he reminded her.

"You hold the lamp till I hop down. Oh . . ." she pressed a meditative finger against her lower lip. "We don't need to leave the thing to rust in the snow, Nick. There's a loose log at the end of the tomb—Seenia

showed it to me years ago. It swings in on a hinge. We'll put the lamp in there."

They descended and began pressing against one log after another in the end wall. Nick found the right one at last and it swung slowly in under his strength. "It's strange you never told me about this before, Sasha," he began as he thrust his head in the narrow opening. "I—Good Lord! Some one's using this place for a cache!"

He pushed the log farther back and scrambled in, followed closely by the astonished girl. It was true; as the yellow eye of his pocket flash-light played about it revealed a bundle and a pile of gunny-sacks in the middle of the sandy floor.

Nick knelt down and began lifting the loose sacks. They were stained and damp, and used evidently as a covering for something that lay beneath. The something proved to be a board and two small steel traps.

"Fox traps!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Yes, and a stretcher for the skins, too, Sasha. Some snide outfit has been setting steel traps along the beach and using these sacks to carry home the catch—or to carry it here—that's why they're blood-stained. By George, that's what happened to Alexander!" Nick's voice was vibrant with honest indignation. "They, or he, rather, for anyone can see it's a one-man job by the meagerness of the outfit, he's been using this place for a skinning shed. The sacrilegious hound!" Nick snapped a trap viciously as if he were mentally closing it on the neck of its owner. "Pass over that bundle, Sasha."

With a dizzy sensation of helplessness Sasha put out her foot and shoved the roll along the sand toward

Nicolai. He was so engrossed in his recent discoveries that he seemed hardly aware of her as he thrust the flash-light into her hand with a request that she hold it. He unwrapped the oil-cloth cover and the package unrolled with a soft crackling sound, disclosing the dried, pale surfaces of two fox skins turned fur side in.

"Oh . . . Nick. . . ." Sasha's voice quavered as she caught up the pelts. "Think of it—my Blues in a steel trap!"

"The scoundrel! the petty low-down sneak! One stretcher—" Nick held up the board in wrathful disgust. "Come on, dear—" he looked at her for the first time as if he realized that this was primarily her affair and not his. "Come. Let's get out of here. I left word for Feodor to come over this afternoon, and when he gets here, we'll put him on guard to nail this thieving dog!" He rose to a stooping position, tucking the two skins under his arm. "Let me take the light, Sasha. You go ahead."

He flashed the light about the small chamber and stooped to pick up something from the sand. His fingers closed over it as he stepped out into the windy sunshine. After his cramped position in the tomb he straightened his tall figure slowly. A second later he was staring incredulously at the thing in his hand.

"Good—God!" he ejaculated.

With a quick, unceremonious movement Sasha drew his palm low enough so that she could see what lay there. Then the snowy world and the blue sky blended in a sickening whirl.

It was Gary Tynan's battered old wrist watch.

CHAPTER XVIII

NICK'S discoveries in the tomb had wrought him to a high pitch of excitement.

"By George!" he ejaculated, with a determined movement of his fist. "I've got to figure this thing out! I've got to find where that fellow Tynan has gone!" So intent was he on his thoughts that he seemed hardly conscious of Sasha, who followed blindly in his footsteps to the skiff. His lean, long face sharpened and his eyes took on their old smoldering look as he rowed back to the *Seal Pup*.

Side-money was standing in the bow watching them through the glasses. When he helped Sasha aboard his quick, black eyes darted from her to Nick and back again. He seemed feverishly eager to know what they had found at the tomb, but Nick, telling him as little as possible, set him to steering the launch toward the nearest feeding-station.

When the first stop was made, Sasha, still dazed, went ashore with the two men. She followed them up the snowy little gully to the top of the bank while memory painted on the background of her misery that August evening when she had first led Gary Tynan to the station and had shown him how to bait a fox trap. Could he have been planning, even then, to take advantage of his position on Rocking Moon? Answer-

ing her thought came a mental picture of him as he stood, slim and tall under the spruce trees, listening to her. Always when she thought of him, it was the expression of his eyes that she remembered vividly—his black-lashed eyes that were so gray—and honest. Something kept trying to tell her they were honest eyes—yet there was his watch, and the steel traps and the pelts! And his absence . . . She stood lost in a maze of confused ideas oblivious to her surroundings until Nick's voice called her back to the present.

"Sasha—" he came tramping through the snow toward her. "I'm afraid it's more bad luck, *milaya,*" he began hesitatingly. "There—there isn't a single fox track about the station—and the food in every trap here is untouched. Not a door has been sprung——"

She moved back a step, looking at him as if trying to comprehend the import of his words. Then her shoulders sagged and her head fell forward on her bosom. Nick, as if he could not bear to witness her anguish, glanced quickly to where the cold, dark sea was crisping about the bobbing launch. Without speaking the girl turned and made her way toward the skiff, her head bent to the wind that fluttered her white scarf about her.

The trader watched the lonely little figure stumbling along the edge of the whitening surf. His hands fell clenched to his sides, his brows drew together. In his expression was pity, together with a strange indecision. He started impulsively forward as if to call her.

"Easy there, Nash. Soft stuff don't get you nowhere." Side-money swung his feed-cans from the snowy top of a trap.

Nick turned on him with the quick viciousness of a huskie: "Shut up, damn you!" he snarled.

The man shrugged his shoulders under the yoke that held the buckets, and started off down the gully to the row-boat, where Sasha was now sitting, her head bowed in her hands. Nick plunged his fists into his trousers pockets, hesitated, and then, with an air of decision, followed the others.

As the other stations were visited, Sasha stayed aboard the launch, but with each return from the shore the report was the same. Two foxes were trapped at one station, but all the other traps were empty and unsprung, with the food untouched and not a track near them. Where there should have been at least sixty animals at large on the Island, this seemed incredible. It meant but one thing—the fox pirates had not only taken those animals in the corral, but somehow they had managed to steal all the stock Sasha was keeping for herself.

Tossing like a cork on the rising chop of the sea, the *Seal Pup* headed for the ranch-house. Sasha stood with her face pressed against the window of the wheel-house, numbed by the disclosures of the last two hours. When the launch stopped she stepped mechanically to the float.

"You tell the Colonel what has happened, Nicolai," she said wearily. "I—I'm going upstairs to Dad's room. I want to think."

She lay on her father's bed unable to formulate any plan for the future, while slowly the realization of financial ruin took possession of her. Everything on which she had depended was gone. Crushed, helpless, she was adrift on a sea of disaster, blown hither and

thither by the malignant winds of Fate. She and her father and old Seenia. Feodor and the Colonel, too, for both these friends had given her their services, expecting to be paid only when she sold her first foxes. They'd had no money for a year. A moan escaped her when she thought of what she owed them—and she was worse than penniless. They were all penniless —and at the worst season of the year, when there was no work done in or about Rezanoff; no work until the fishing-season opened next April! Like a wild fox in a pen her mind darted from one wall of ruin to another, searching vainly for a way out of her trouble. She could find none. And—there was Gary. Could it be that he was responsible for her disaster?

The rising wind whined through her misery, and after a while she became aware that the Colonel's crutches were thumping up the stairs. Then she heard Nicolai's voice, and presently both men, talking in low tones, passed along the hall to Gary's room. She could hear them moving about in it, and like a nauseating chill, came the conviction that they were searching his belongings as if he were indeed a criminal.

She rose wearily, brushing her hair back from her forehead, and went out into the hall. The door of Gary's room was open, framing the interior like a picture—the bed, smooth, undisturbed under the snowy light of the window above it; the little reading table with a history of the Northwest, and a government report on fox-raising lying beside the lamp; the Colonel seated before the larger table which served Gary as a desk, and Nicolai opposite him, leaning over some papers which engrossed them both.

"By the lord, I can't believe it! I *can't* believe it!"

Colonel Jeff was repeating, as he scanned first one paper and then another. Nick was silent, but his face still wore its puzzled look—an expression Sasha had never seen there before. His swift upward glance found her standing in the doorway.

"Come in, Sasha, and look at this," he invited, pointing to the disarranged mass of papers on the desk. "Found them up there behind that rafter—" he indicated one of the large, peeled logs that ridged the sloping roof of the room. "See this map?" he handed her a tracing on a large piece of wrapping paper.

It was the Island of Rocking Moon, with every little bay and shore indentation marked, every look-out house, every lake, the tomb of Father Paul, and the location of each feeding-station. "And look at this!" Nick thrust into her hand another sketch—a detailed drawing of a feeding-station with the box-traps and their simple mechanism. There was also much data on the fox industry, the mating season, pupping season, time of feeding and the habits of the animals.

"Looks mighty bad—mighty bad!" The Colonel pursed his lips and shook his head regretfully. His loquaciousness for once had deserted him.

"You're right, Colonel. No one but a spy for fox pirates would have any use for this information." Nick's eyes were on Sasha. When she did not speak he began gathering up the scattered notes. "He must have been in league with some one else," he went on. "Some one stationed in a launch about the Islands here. But why in the name of all that's holy he tried to monkey round with those two steel traps gets me."

The Colonel looked up impatiently. "Great Mahogany Ghost, Nick, you're more bothered about those

steel traps than anything else, it seems to me," he bellowed in irritation. "Where's those foxes, that's what I want to know!" He thumped the table with his fist.

Nick went on rolling up the notes and maps. "I'll take these to Kodiak to the marshal when I report the theft," he said. "They'll wire Tynan's description to every town in Alaska. He can't possibly get away—he doesn't know the country well enough."

The trader did not leave the Island at once, but with Side-money he spent several hours down at the float putting the engine of the *Simmie and Ann* in order. Just as they were finishing it, a fish-boat from Rezanoff came bobbing and splashing into the bay to put off Feodor.

He sprang to the float, a slender, dark-skinned creole, with hands like a woman and eyes as large and softly brown as those of the Madonna of Kazan. He had a guitar across his back and a scarlet wool cap pulled down over his black hair.

"She's blowing like hell outside," he called cheerfully to Nick, and without waiting to talk, continued his way to the house.

As he ran lightly up the veranda steps, Sasha opened the door for him. Her cry of welcome caused his lean, dark face to lighten with a singularly winning smile. He jerked his gay cap from his head and brought it against his chest with a grand gesture.

"Solnishko," he beamed, bowing low. "I am here again to take care of you!"

Later, while Nick and the Colonel and Feodor were talking over the great calamity that had befallen, Sasha stood looking out at the little fish-boat scudding away through the flying spray. The wind shrieked like a

siren about the eaves, and the girl's mind went back to the storms of other years, after which fishing-boats and launches had been found floating keel up on the sea.

"I think the fish-boat should have stayed here for the night, Nick. It's getting rough."

"Oh, they'll be all right, Sasha," the trader assured her. "They're going to lie till morning in Bixby's Cove."

"But you won't leave for Kodiak tonight, Nicolai." There was a note of anxiety in her voice. "It's too dangerous on the straits with the wind from this direction."

Nick lifted one shoulder carelessly. "I'll make it all right. I've got to go over to Oo-koon first, anyway, and I can cut across to Kodiak from there. This affair ought to be reported as soon as possible, Sasha. By the way," he added after a moment, "Feodor's arm is in pretty good shape now. I'll take Side-money with me, I think. It's always better to have two men aboard the *Pup* in the winter."

"You're crazy to start out now, Nick." Feodor's statement was emphatic. "You'll be bucking a head wind all the way. If the weather gets any colder you'll be iced down before you've gone thirty miles."

Again Nick shrugged. "It won't get any colder," he asserted, and a few moments later passed out on his way to his launch.

Sasha, at the window, looked over the snow to the float. The two launches bumped and rocked on the water and beyond them the bay, bleak, lettuce-green in the wan sunlight, was torn to tatters and skurrying vapors under the lash of the whistling wind. Gusts of dry snow came whirling and stinging against the

windows like volleys of salt. It would be a bitter night on the sea, yet Nicolai was going to brave the danger of it for her—to call the law to her aid. But could anyone bring back her stolen foxes, she thought despondently; or her faith in men—in Gary?

In the light of the last few hours her thoughts went back over the months of the cheechako's sojourn on Rocking Moon, and she weighed the evidence for and against him. She found it for the most part, against him. He had never been much of a talker, but always an eager listener. She remembered that he had encouraged all of them to talk—especially of the Island and the foxes. He had tried to secure information from Nick about the Island of Oo-koon, and he had sat for hours listening to old Seenia. Unlike Nicolai, he never talked of himself, of his past achievements, of his future hopes. She knew he had been in France during the war, yet he never spoke of it in detail. Always he seemed to be waiting for something. Could it have been that he was waiting for the opportunity her father's peril had given him? Something within her answered no—but Nick had said she was no judge of human nature. She had never been out in the world—the real world.

Anyone could see that Gary Tynan was no laborer, yet when his steamer came, instead of going South, he had preferred to stay on at Rocking Moon—at a laborer's wage. She recalled that foggy day on the north cliffs when they had sat on a log and watched the shags on the rocks below. He had told her then—if she did not need him, he was going to take a cabin at Rezanoff, and she— Her cheeks grew hot at the recollection. Why, oh, why, had she allowed him to see how happy

she was because he remained? And on that last night when they had skated alone on Toyon Lake—she had told him by her manner, by her words that he was dear to her. She shook her head in desperate deprecation of her own action. Her face burned with a flame of self-condemnation. And yet she called back that exquisite, palpitant moment when he had placed his hands on her shoulders and bent down to her, his dark face transfigured with a soft, rapt expression that set her heart beating, even now, with a reflection of that new and wonderful rapture that had been hers then.

What had he been going to tell her—when Alexander's cry sounded in the woods back of them? She had thought he was going to say he loved her. She was ready to hear it; she longed to hear him say it—but now— Again a flame of humiliation seared her. She despised herself for a sentimental weakling. How he must have laughed at her when he was alone! How simple he must have thought her! She tortured herself picturing him laughing with his dark head thrown back and his mouth a little to one side. A sardonic laugh, scornful, cruel, like the mirth of Nicolai when she overheard him once telling Feodor about a waitress in San Francisco. The fact that she had never seen Gary Tynan like this added a terrible verisimilitude to the picture.

A slow rage began to kindle in her heart, a rage that fed on the realization that back of all, Sasha now knew she had been near to loving this cheechako—the man who set steel traps to rob her of her foxes, the man who desecrated the tomb of Father Paul, and maimed Alexander; the man who had made her a pauper. She had been near to loving him, and even now—she wanted

him back more than she wanted anything else in the world. And he—no doubt he was speeding away on a fast launch toward the south, or toward Siberia, with her little fortune aboard. Perhaps he was standing on the after-deck, his hands in his pockets, laughing back at her. She could almost hear him. Her delicate little jaw set, and her eyes glowed angrily as her fingers twitched. For the first time in her life she felt the urge to fasten them on another's throat—the smooth, brown throat of Gary Tynan. Paradoxically she found a savage comfort in this mounting rage that was taking possession of her. Anything was better than the inertia that followed her realization of ruin.

In this mood she began seeing Nick with new eyes, Nick, who had stood by her so well during the last few days. He had put aside everything to help her. She had never truly appreciated his interest in her affairs before. He had warned her long ago against Gary Tynan—but she had not listened. Perhaps, after all, Nick was a better judge of people than she had thought. She wished she had listened to him more graciously. He was down on the *Seal Pup* now, making ready to brave the danger of a northern gale for her. . . . Sasha suddenly turned from the window and slipped into her white mackinaw and cap.

"I'm going down to talk to Nicolai before he leaves, Colonel Jeff," she said, as she stood with her hand on the door-knob.

"Better get him to stay here all night, my dear. It's going to be mighty risky on the sea tonight—even for him." The Colonel looked up over the smoking pipe in his hand, and Seenia, in her chair by the fireplace, nodded her white head in confirmation of his words.

Sasha started down the path toward the float, through whirling dry snow that stung her face and blinded her. She was forced to bend her head and literally plow into the wind which held her back. The ocean outside the Island was sending up an awakening roar, and the wind whistled through the rigging of the two launches that nuzzled the float. Smoke from the stove-pipe of the *Seal Pup's* cabin blew wildly toward the shore leaving a trail of coal gas on the cold air.

When Nick saw her coming, he opened the door of the wheel-house, and with a surprised and pleased look, drew her inside.

"Did you come to say good-bye to me, Sasha?" He smiled. "Come on down into the cabin where it's nice and warm. Side-money has gone up to the house to pack his plunder. The tide will be just about right for us to start in another half hour."

Nicolai, with his soft flannel olive-drab shirt slightly bloused above his narrow hips had, at this moment, the appeal of the young bachelor surprised at home duties. He had evidently been setting the cozy cabin of the *Pup* to rights, for he swept aside a roll of papers that lay on the lower bunk, and shook up the cushions to make a back rest for Sasha. She laid aside her coat and cap and rubbed her chilled hands. A fire was glowing in the tiny stove and roaring up the pipe. The warmth was good after the biting wind, and the gentle bobbing of the launch against the float singularly pleasant. Even the sound of wind and water added to the feeling of snugness and man-made safety in the little room. Sasha, born to boats and the ways of the sea, had a man's appreciation of a good launch.

"The *Pup's* a homey little craft, Nicolai." Her eyes

were approving as she settled back against the cushions.

"Isn't she? I always keep her outfitted for a six weeks' trip. She's really the only home I have—until I find some one to help me make one ashore." He looked at her meaningly. "But just wait until next year," he went on with eagerness. "I'll have a cutter that will be the talk of the coast. See here, Sasha—" he picked up the roll of papers from the bunk. "Here are the plans." Drawing up a stool he sat in front of her and began to unroll the tracings on his knees. "I'll have the money next year to do this up right. After all, Sasha, if you have money, you can get anything in this world you want. Down in the States they never ask you *how* you got it, either. It's just *have* you got it. Money talks—" he looked up from the paper. Something in Sasha's expression silenced him.

"Nicolai—" she paused and hesitatingly laid a hand on his arm. "Have you thought how much money you are going to lose—because of this robbery?"

His eyes met hers for the fraction of a second before they dropped to her hand on his sleeve. He covered it with his warm palm, and with his blond head still bent said sympathetically:

"I've been thinking only of you—and your father."

The last works sank into the girl's consciousness. Her father! What a home-coming—after being shipwrecked! Within a month he would have no home, unless they moved back to the old Rezanoff parish house now falling into ruin for want of repairs.

"Rocking Moon will be yours, Nick. We can never pay you now, and——"

"Rocking Moon will *never* be mine!" Nick's voice was vibrant. "Good Lord, Sasha!" He put her hand

back on her lap and flung himself off the stool to take a short turn in the tiny cabin. "Do you think for one minute that I'd hold you to that darned mortgage?" He paused before her, looking down with indignation in his eyes. "What kind of a friend do you take me for, anyway? Why, look here, Sasha"—impulsively he sat down again before her, emphasizing his words with gestures of his hands. "That money my dad advanced for this ranch is yours. I have nothing to do with that at all. It's settled. You don't owe me a cent."

Sasha shook her head in slow denial.

"No, you don't," he went on. "Frankly, dear, I wouldn't have advanced you a dollar to start a fox-ranch. I never did like this notion of yours. Women should be dependent on men for their support, Sasha. The old ways are the best. This place of yours has been my rival from the beginning. If it hadn't been for it you'd have married me long ago." He leaned toward her, his elbows on his knee, his fingers busy with the tassel on the end of her sash. "But—even if you won't marry me, *milaya,*" he continued slowly, "you know that I will always have enough for you and your father. You know you can depend on me, don't you?" He reached for her hand, but checked the motion midway. His restraint was not without its effect on Sasha.

"You have always been kind to me, Nicolai."

"Kind!" he burst out in impatient scorn. "My God, Sasha, will you never grow up!" He flung out his hand. "I don't want to be *kind* to you. I love you!"

The girl was silent, her eyes on the port-hole splashed with brine. After a moment or two Nick went on in a voice consciously subdued and calculated to appeal to

her loyalty, her love of her country: "Have you ever thought, Sasha, how the old Russian families are dying out? Your father is the last of his line. There are but few of us left in Alaska now, and—think of it, dear—ours is the best blood in America! Ours is the viking blood of the North Pacific—the Russian blood that dared the unexplored, superstition-haunted Arctic sea, in ships frail as cockle-shells. Ours is the Russian spirit that sailed on in spite of mutiny, scurvy, disease, vermin; in spite of food that crawled with worms and drinking water thick and foul in the casks!" Nick sprang to his feet, his eyes glowing. "Ours is the Russian courage, Sasha, that braved blizzards, gales, grinding ice; that drove along through a terrifying region of fog thick as a blanket, stained blood-red by the fires of hidden volcanoes, fog shot through with subterranean rumblings pregnant with destruction! Oh, think of it, Sasha, *lubimaya—*" Nick's voice was triumphant, his head lifted like a conqueror's—"Ours is the blood that discovered and tamed Alaska, the wildest, most beautiful, most hazardous land in the world! Do we want that blood diluted, lost through marriage with milk-and-water strangers from the South? Do we, Sasha?" The Irishman in Nick, always ready to be intoxicated by love, liquor, or his own eloquence, was now, paradoxically, all Russian.

Without giving the girl a chance to answer he went on, his speech softened, his eyes alight with his own visions:

"Sasha, honey, can't you see the Governor's House at Rezanoff restored to its old-time comfort, as it was when my grandfather was a commander in the Russian fleet of commerce, and yours was the head of the Or-

thodox Church in the Americas? Can't you see yourself there as mistress—*my* wife, the mother of my children, with servants and everything money can buy for you, dear? Can't you see your father happy with his books and his Church and his orphanage—yes, I'll see that he has money to build that too, Sasha. . . . And every year you can come back here for the summer. And every fall we both shall go to the States and live as I shall show you how to live, *milaya.*"

Sasha tried to speak, but he bent and caught her hand in both of his. "Wait—wait till I'm through telling you, Sasha. Oh, sweetheart, I've never wanted anything in my life as I've wanted you—and I've waited so long—" he leaned toward her, singularly young and ardent as he pleaded his cause. If only he had been like this in the beginning, Sasha thought regretfully, instead of arrogantly assuming her willingness to be loved by him.

"I can make you the happiest girl in the world—if you'll marry me," he went on. "And you need me, Sasha. You need me to look out for you. . . . See how strong I am!" Like a boy he flung out his arms and flexed his muscles. A momentary flash of tenderness showed in the girl's eyes—a tenderness that was maternal. "We Alaskans should marry one of our own kind. I know that. I've—I've had experiences that you never could have, Sasha, and I know that there is something in you and in me that demands that cool, clean streak which underlies all our desires, all our passions. It's the thing that makes the women of the South seem wilted, *milaya,* when I compare them with you. It's the thing that sent me back here determined I'd marry you, sweetheart."

Sasha looked up at him, her eyes wide with wonder. Last night on the launch she had been nearly carried away by his passion, and now his eloquence swayed her. Never had he appeared so attractive, so sincere—this Nicolai who could make love to her in so many different ways. She had known him all her life—yet she did not know him. Intuitively she was conscious also of still another side of him, which he never showed to her now—that side which held an indescribable element of danger and allure; that hint of superlative savagery which used to come out in him when he danced the Whaler's Incantation and the Shaman's Dance. Something in her had always responded to him then, she remembered. She knew that something would respond now—if Nick only knew how to call it forth. It was an instinct untamed and ecstatic, that they had in common, though Nicolai, because he had chosen her for his wife, imagined that this bond was something cool and sane, befitting the mother of his children. He had seated himself again on the stool in front of her, and was waiting for her to speak. For a moment she pictured life with Nick, should she marry him—brief periods of fiercely rapturous madness, followed by long weeks of cold indifference on her part—hatred perhaps. But . . . there would always be financial security, bodily comfort for herself, her father and old Seenia . . . With Gary——

A sudden bitter recklessness swept her at the thought of Gary. She leaned forward, a question on her lips, and for the first time in her life laid her hand on Nick's thick, fair hair just below her.

At the contact every atom of her being leaped to a wild, new thrill.

"Oh!" She caught her breath, snatching away her hand, wondering what had happened to her.

The next instant she was swept into Nick's arms and he was murmuring passionate Russian endearments against her ear to the wild accompaniment of roaring wind and sea outside the rocking launch.

CHAPTER XIX

ON the night that Sasha left Rocking Moon for the radio station at Kodiak, Gary stood on the float watching the vanishing *Seal Pup* until its lights disappeared on the other side of Lookout Point. It was not until the diminishing sound of the exhaust died out over the dark waters that he stirred. Then, fighting a feeling of loneliness such as he had never before known in his roving life, he slowly retraced his steps to the house.

The garrulous yelps of fifty restless foxes came to him from the corral back of the barn where he knew the animals were peering, with eyes of blue flame, through the meshes of the enclosure. The Colonel's hasty reference to fox-poachers was disquieting. He quickened his footsteps with the intention of asking Side-money to tell him more about fox-poaching in Southeastern Alaska.

But the helper was nowhere about the place, though he had left the float after a short conversation with Nick just before the *Seal Pup* pulled out. Gary put some wood on the coals in the fireplace, and taking up a lantern went out to the barn. He called, but the silence was broken only by the yelping of the aroused foxes.

The lantern that usually hung upon a nail near the

salmon vats was gone, however, and Gary concluded that Side-money was off on another of his nocturnal prowls. Something there was about the fellow which Gary did not trust, yet he was forced to admit the helper was diligent in his surveillance of the beaches.

Alexander was still in the living-room. Realizing that the thick-coated animal would be more comfortable where it was cooler, Gary dragged down some hay from the rack over the cow's stall, and made a bed in one corner of the barn. He was soon settling the wounded fox in these new quarters.

As he eased Alexander onto the hay he felt the animal's hot little tongue caressing his hand.

"Poor little cuss!" He stroked the soft fur sympathetically. "Tough luck . . . tough luck." With a gusty sigh Alex placed his muzzle on the young man's knee and looked up with such eyes of misery that Gary's throat contracted.

"It's hell, old man. It's hell," he repeated at intervals. Alexander, with his shy, wild ways of friendliness had established himself firmly in Gary's affections. The sight of the bandaged leg sent his mind back to the many times two perfect forefeet had rested against his chest as the fox stood to snuggle a cool little nose against his neck.

"You human little devil!" he said with regretful tenderness. It hurt him to think that any creature so beautiful should have to go always on three legs, stumping along like a maimed young veteran of the world war.

Thrusting the last thought hastily from him, he was giving Alex a good-night pat, when a sharp yelp from the other side of the lantern-lit barn drew his eyes.

The little Sampson, because of the cold weather, was domiciled in a den in the barn, and the dim glow showed his tiny, astute face peering out with expectant impatience from his door. His "outfit," so laboriously contrived by the Colonel, had shifted askew, and the dangling bits of red tape with which it was tied gave him a look so comical that Gary chuckled.

He crossed over and looked down at the queer little beast.

"Hello, Clown!" he said, stooping to rub a bare ear. "I suppose you want attention now, don't you? It begins to look as if I had a fox hospital on my hands—though you're a proper subject for a beauty parlor, Sam. . . . No, no—" as Sampson began esctatically nosing his hand—"I'm not going to give you any rubbing with tonic now, my boy. You'll get your massage tomorrow."

He passed out to look over the foxes in the corral before he went back to the house.

On the veranda he stood a moment gazing out on the dim, dark bay over which clouds were blotting out great areas of stars. It seemed years, instead of hours, since he and Sasha had skated on Toyon Lake under the aurora. His thoughts dwelt on that brief period of happiness and it was not until he saw a light bobbing along the beach below that he came back to the present. A few minutes later Side-money lumbered up the path swinging his lantern.

"Just thought I'd take a look-see over the outer beach to make sure no boat is anchoring off the Island." He held the lantern before his face and turned down the wick. "I been kinda uneasy lately. That there fox gettin' his foot caught that way—I don't know. . . .

Looks like a steel trap to me. What you think, Tynan?" He squinted out from under the shadow of his hat brim, his sharp eyes searching Gary's face. Then he laughed as he answered the question himself. "Don't know just what to think, maybe—a cheechako like you, eh?"

"Come inside and we'll talk it over. Maybe a sourdough like yourself can enlighten me," Gary added dryly, aware of the covert mockery in the man's voice.

Talking it over with Side-money revealed little, and it was not long before the helper stood up and gave a prodigious yawn that disclosed all his tobacco-stained teeth. "We-l-l," he said, knocking the ashes from his pipe, "guess I'll be hittin' the hay."

After he had gone Gary sat before the fireplace thinking. Morning was so near he did not go to bed but made himself a cup of coffee, and bringing down from his room a note-book, sat before the living-room fire busily writing. A time or two he walked to the windows and looked out. The atmosphere was filled with slowly falling flakes—the first snow of the season. It occurred to him to marvel at the mildness of the climate in the Aleutians. It was the last of November, and here, in what the outside world was ever calling "the frigid North," the first snow was falling, gently, quietly, bringing him a feeling of security rather than coldness.

Side-money came down stairs after a while, stopping midway to yawn mightily, as he had five hours before, when he ascended to his room.

The early morning hours were spent in the barn cooking fox-food, and attending to the cow, whose outdoor roaming was at an end now that the snow had

come. Alexander was able to hobble painfully from his straw and eat the bird-stew Gary made for him by abstracting a jar of Sasha's canned duck from the cellar. It was about noon when the two men carried the fox-food down to the *Simmie and Ann,* and Side-money prepared for the run about the Island on his way to Rezanoff for Feodor.

Snow had been coming down thickly all morning, and already Rocking Moon lay white in the quiet, opaque olive of the sea. The buyers would never come in such weather.

Side-money was in a jocose mood, despite his short night's sleep. Gary went carefully over the temperamental engine of the launch before the helper went aboard.

"Handle her gently," he cautioned. "Don't go monkeying with the carburetor if she begins to miss. She'll pick up again all right if you let her alone."

"Don't you worry none about me runnin' an engine!" proclaimed Side-money, stepping inside the wheel-house with a prideful pose of the chest. The next moment his head was thrust out of the window, his big, stained teeth exposed in a wide grin. "So long, Tynan!" He waved his hand. "If I don't show up, you'll know a fox-pirate got me." He laughed and a few minutes later the launch shot away through the falling snow.

Gary carried food to the two stations nearest the house, and then fed the foxes in the pens. For an hour he busied himself shoveling out a path to the barn, although the snow was falling thickly, blotting out even the forest that lay so close to the back of the fox pens. He began a path from the veranda toward the beach, pausing often in his work to look out toward

the bay. Because of the descending flakes he could see no further than the upper line of the beach, where yellowed blades of rice-grass stuck up through the snowy ridge. He listened, thinking he might hear the sound of the *Simmie and Ann's* exhaust, but the silence was intense. It seemed as tangible as the falling snow. Even the murmur of the sea was smothered in the soft, steady descent.

Early twilight had come by the time the last path was finished. Gary shook the white thatch from his head and shoulders and glanced at his watch. It was after four o'clock. As he tightened the worn strap that bound the timepiece rather insecurely to his wrist, he wondered how much longer it would be before Side-money and Feodor returned.

He stamped in the back way to the kitchen to prepare a mulligan against the return of the hungry men, and lit the lamps. The house, still as a tomb, echoed to his footsteps. In the living-room the chairs of Seenia and Colonel Jeff were achingly vacant. He tried to dispel the loneliness by building up a fire in the living-room; but the ruddy glow seemed only to emphasize the emptiness and stillness. He stood a moment looking at Sasha's chair. The Indian basket that held her knitting filled the space between the arms. The scarf she had been working on spilled its yellow softness over the edge of the basket and a ball of wool had fallen to the floor. He stooped to pick it up, his hands lingering on the bright yarn her fingers had known.

"Sasha . . . *solnishko moyo* . . ." softly, experimentally he spoke the Russian endearment he had often heard Zoya use. Then, though he was all alone, he shot a swift glance about and his lean face grew scarlet

to the roots of his hair. He was a darned, sentimental fool, he told himself, as he stalked off to the kitchen to add a bit of water to the mulligan which was already sending up appetizing whiffs of steam from under its agitated lid.

He was replenishing the wood in the kitchen range when it occurred to him that he would have time to give little Sampson his rub before the men came home. He slipped a jar of hair-salve—recently substituted by the Colonel for the tonic—into his mackinaw pocket, and added a broken cigar box with the idea of making new splints for Alexander's leg. He was just turning away when his eye fell on the knife Colonel Jeff called his "Toad-stabber." It was of home manufacture and had first manifested as a file in the world of commerce. The Colonel had sharpened it to a razor-like edge which, when not in use, was protected by a walrus-hide sheath. It was the very thing for cutting splints and Gary, after putting it in his pocket, lighted his lantern and started for the barn.

Already the new trail was an inch deep in snow, but the falling flakes were fewer and smaller. He hung his lantern on a nail in the barn, the movement making shadows dance wildly about the two great salmon vats squatting in the dusk at the farther end.

"Now then, little Can-o'-worms, we'll attend to you first," he remarked as he interrupted Sampson's welcoming wriggles by taking him up in his arms. With a word to Alexander uncurling expectantly on his straw bed, Gary sat on the floor, his back to the vats, and began to untie the red tape which fastened Sampson into his outfit. The heavy mackinaw hindered the free use of his arms, so he drew it off, and taking

the jar of salve from the pocket, tossed the garment towards Alex's bed.

The tiny nude fox stretched out across Gary's knees in a preparatory attitude as the young man jabbed his fingers into the jar, talking meanwhile to break the unaccustomed loneliness.

"Sam, old kid, it begins to look as if this treatment is a case of love's labor lost." He was smearing some salve on the palm of his hand when a faint, stealthy sound in the shadows back of him arrested the action. . . . Snow slipping from the eaves, he decided after a moment, and began rubbing the bare back of the fox. "Yes, Sampson, I'm afraid you'll have to go through life naked as an egg. We've used pretty nearly everything known to man and unless——"

A sudden sense of danger—a strange, occult warning, for there had been no other sound, made him raise his head sharply and half turn around. The next instant there came the thud of a blow, a queer, long sigh, and Gary crumpled with almost ludicrous slowness to the floor.

Consciousness struggled to break through the lethargy creeping over him. He heard, as a man going under an anæsthetic, the fast-dimming voices of men, a scuffling behind him, and the rapid firing of a rifle outside the barn. He tried desperately to rouse himself, but it was useless. He sank into a timeless pit of oblivion where he went down, down, down, laved by smooth undulating waves of darkness. . . .

When Gary again became vaguely conscious of existence he was floating up out of the vast silence of the pit. Something hard made itself felt at the back of his neck. He moved his head, seemed to lose control of

it, and it swung in a gigantic half circle over a stony surface. The ensuing pain did much to bring him to himself. A burble of subdued voices a long way off penetrated to his inner consciousness. He tried to reassemble the faculties that had deserted him, but was aware only of the ache at the back of his head—intolerable now. Impressions leaped aside as he strove to grasp them. . . .

He shivered, and at last, by a superhuman effort of will was able to open his eyes. For an indefinite time he was the center of a swiftly moving dark disk edged with light. Gradually the speed of the disk slackened . . . spread out . . . flattened . . became stationary, and to Gary's blurred wonder the light resolved itself into a lantern hanging from a post. He stared, wide-eyed, with mental activity suspended. Then sounds began to be clear to him,—the rumble of voices, the tramp and crunch of feet. Struggles. Yelps. He lay vainly trying to connect these disturbances with the lighted lantern.

"Put three in a sack at once . . . get a move on there. . . ."

"Come on! *Come—on!*" a tensed, half-whispered conversation was going on nearer.

"Aw, let's get that one in the barn, Con. It's the best of the lot!"

"Don' be a damn fool altogether. That cheechako's liable to come to any minute now. *Come on,* I tell you. Even if he can't move, he can *see!*"

There was a crunching of snow, a diminishing of the voices and then silence.

Slowly, jerkily, with short lapses into abeyance, memory returned to Gary. He was in Sasha Laria-

noff's barn. Some one had crept up behind him and hit him on the head. He did not know how long ago, but he was cold, very cold. Something lay warm against him. He tried to put out his hand and found that he lay bound hand and foot with his sore head resting on one of the big Russian bricks near the stove.

Through his bewilderment he felt the warm thing stir, and though the effort was agonizing, he lifted his head. There, snuggling and shivering against him was the little naked Sampson, who missed his warm outfit lying now beside the overturned jar of salve in the middle of the floor.

Gary's head fell back on the brick once more and for a moment he lay nauseated, unable to make further effort. Then through the silence came the sharp cough of a starting engine down at the float. It was followed by the steady throb of a running motor. The diminishing sound of the exhaust galvanized Gary into a desperate alertness. As a mother knows her child's voice, so the launchman knows the sound and rhythm of his own engine, and Gary realized that it was not the *Simmie and Ann* speeding away from the float. Neither was it the *Seal Pup.* Yet, somewhere he had heard that peculiar, mechanical pulsing before. . . . Then, like a flash it came to him: It was the same motor that had carried the mysterious hidden launch away in the fog that day he and Sasha had crossed over to the tomb of Father Paul!

His mind clarified suddenly. The voices, the yelping, the sound of the departing launch, all the hazy, amorphous impressions of the last ten minutes crystallized into realization staggering as a blow—the foxes! Some one had robbed the corral back of the barn! He

must get out immediately to see which way the launch went!

He made a frantic effort to roll himself sideways, but the violent jerk made his head throb again. A moment later, when he succeeded in sitting up he found that not only was he bound hand and foot, but the rope had been fastened to the iron ring in the rim of the huge kettle embedded in the brick stove.

He made another terrific and unreasoning effort to roll himself away from the stove, with the same result. Again he sat up and struggled to free his hands bound behind his back. The rope chafed, then cut through the skin. His watch slipped off his wrist, but the knots did not give. He continued to strain, gritting his teeth and cursing until the little Sampson crept away and huddled shivering at a distance, regarding his former friend with frightened, yellow eyes. Then sanity returned. While the faint chugging of the departing launch mocked him, Gary began to think.

The way out came—a desperate inspiration. He shook the long black hair from his eyes and called: "Alexander!" Alexander should bring him his coat lying in the gloom of the far corner, the Toad-stabber still in the pocket. He called again turning his head farther around so he could see the straw bed.

It was empty.

Gary was swept by a sickening surge. He closed his eyes to shut out the dizzy whirling of the lantern. As he tried to steady himself he became aware that something was moving stealthily behind the salmon vats. He stiffened and listened. When he opened his eyes a profanely joyous greeting burst from him, for Alexander, with furtive, wary looks was limping out from

his hiding-place where he had been concealed while the disturbance was going on.

"You clever little son-of-a-gun!" broke from Gary in a half-sob of thanksgiving. But—was Alexander's intelligence and capacity for affection great enough to surmount his fear and the pain of his crippled leg?

"Hello, Alex!" Gary's voice was coaxing, while his mind tried to banish the thought that the retrieving lessons might be forgotten for the time being. "Bring me my coat. Go ahead—get it, old boy."

The fox paused and glanced toward the brick stove; then he continued to limp toward his bed. A moment later he had settled down on the straw. Gary knew the animal must be in pain but the need for haste drove him to renewed appeals. Alexander lifted his head in response to the voice he had learned to love and obey, and made a tremendous effort to rise, only to fall back again. Gary groaned as he met the look of those round, anguished eyes. They pleaded as plainly as words that it was impossible for a crippled fox to play the old game tonight. Gary began again, coaxing, beseeching, until the sweat stood out on his forehead and little Sampson, encouraged by the tones of his voice, came tiptoeing back to cuddle down beside him again.

It seemed an hour to the intense, anxious Gary, though in reality it was not more than five minutes before Alexander struggled to his feet and stood shivering, his eyes on his bound friend.

"My coat, Alex! Bring it here. . . . T-h-a-t'-s the boy!"

Painfully at last the fox hobbled to the coat, nipped it by the sleeve and coming slowly on his three legs,

dragged the heavy garment a few inches along the floor. He sank, with a whine of pain, his eyes pleading for release.

"Come on . . . come on, little fellow. . . ."

Fearing that the knife would slip from the wide pocket, Gary held his breath as the plucky little animal limped nearer and nearer. · When the fox was beside him holding the mackinaw up in his mouth, he dropped it at a word and stood expectantly awaiting the petting and the reward of food that had heretofore been his for the service.

The instant the garment lay on the floor Gary rolled over till his bound hands could fumble for the knife. His fingers fastened avidly about the handle. Several vain attempts to sever the cord about his wrists brought blood, but persistent efforts resulted in freedom. The next instant he had boldly slashed the rope that bound his ankles.

As his bonds fell from him he rushed out of doors where he could see the bay. It had stopped snowing and the night was strangely luminous. But there was no sign of the launch. Neither could he hear the sound of the motor.

He plunged through the snow toward the fox pens where the doors hung open. A few minutes later he came out of the enclosure and leaned weakly against the framework of the door.

Every fox was gone.

CHAPTER XX

WITH his hands pressed to his aching head, Gary stumbled back to the barn. He thrust his arms into the sleeves of his mackinaw and picked up his fallen watch, strapping it again to his wrist. Hastily tying Sampson's outfit on him, he placed the little animal beside Alexander, already settled in his straw bed, and after a hurried pat on the wounded fox's head, ran out into the snow.

He kept on through the alder grove until he could look down on the float. It lay, a nebulous square on the quiet darkness of the water. The *Simmie and Ann* had not returned. He was alone on Rocking Moon without a boat at a time when everything depended on one. A maddening sense of impotence seized him as he realized his helplessness.

He concentrated his whole being on listening. There was not a sound in the gray, twilit world except the far-off murmur of the sea. The pirate launch had passed out of hearing, but which way? It might have gone either round Lookout Point in the direction of Rezanoff, or round Lampadny Point. A moment's consideration convinced him that Lookout would have shut off the sound of the engine in a very few moments and he was quite sure he had heard the peculiar throb of the motor at least ten minutes. He must reach

Lampadny before the launch passed from sight—but how?

Like an inspiration came the thought of the little kayak—the one-hatch skin boat that had been stowed away on a rack behind a larger two-hatch bidarka in the barn. He lowered the light craft to the floor and with it on his back hurried down to the float. A moment later, propelled by swift, strong strokes of the double paddle, the kayak was speeding like a nutshell before a wind. Gary's thoughts kept pace with it as the dim, snow-laden forests of Rocking Moon slipped past him.

He reasoned that some of the robbers had entered the barn by way of the forest under cover of the falling snow of the afternoon. The waiting pirate launch, probably anchored on the other side of Lookout Point, had come into the float at the gun-shot signal Gary had heard when he was sinking into unconsciousness. He was puzzled at the smoothness with which everything had worked into the fox-pirates' hands. Each act had been timed to a nicety. Yet—what if Side-money had returned with the *Simmie and Ann,* and caught them? Had they kept a watchman on the Lookout? Gary remembered the helper's last joking words: "If I don't come home, you'll know a fox-pirate got hold of me." Could they have made away with the fellow —and with the *Simmie and Ann?*

Question succeeded question in the young man's mind as the little boat rounded the low white arm of Lampadny Point, and began its course along the outer beach. How had the pirates known just how to time their raid at the moment when he was alone on the Island? he was asking himself, when the cross of

Father Paul, his objective, loomed above the snow. An instant later his paddle fell athwart the kayak and an exclamation of amazement escaped him.

From the old missionary's *lampada* a light was shining out over the sea!

Gary quickened his strokes until the bow of the kayak ran with a soft thud on the dark sandy strip swept clean by the receding tide. He sprang from the man-hole, drew the skin boat up on the beach, and plunged through the snow toward the log tomb.

The six-foot cross made an excellent lookout for scanning the sea. Gary shinned up to the top bar and sat astride the upright. For some minutes his eyes searched the ocean, seeing nothing but the limitless miles of dark, undulating water under a clearing sky that had taken on the serene pure blue of night. A few widely scattered stars hung large and blurred behind drifting moth-colored clouds, or sprang into brilliance when the ragged, diaphanous mists sailed past.

Again and again his glances swept the wide half circle. Only the faint, smudged-in pyramid of Ookoon relieved the emptiness. Evidently, Gary told himself, his reasoning as to the course of the pirate launch had been faulty. It must have gone round Lookout Point, after all. But where was Side-money, and the *Simmie and Ann?* Once more, with that hope that is born of uncertainty, he began a last scrutiny of the watery wilderness.

His eyes had become accustomed to the mysterious reaches of the sea and a pale light was making an illumination toward the east. He turned his head slowly, but as before, nothing arrested his attention

until his gaze fastened on shadowy Oo-koon. . . . He started, and forgetful of his precarious perch, leaned forward so suddenly that he nearly lost his balance. *Between Rocking Moon and that far island something dark lay low on the water!* Was it the pirate launch —or a wave? A wave would flatten . . . This did not. Was it the mysterious launch, or the *Simmie and Ann*, gone off her reckoning in the afternoon snow and now returning? . . . He watched it so intently that his eyes filmed with moisture.

The object drew no nearer. On the contrary, it grew smaller. It vanished—vanished in the direction of Oo-koon. Perhaps Nick Nash's ranch was next on the list.

Gary slid down from the cross and a stream of light shot over him from the reflector of the new lamp as he stood in the snow on the roof of the tomb. He stamped his feet and waved his arms to restore his circulation, before he opened the glass door of the *lampada*. The oil in the lamp was nearly gone. From the amount burned—if it had been full in the beginning—it was evident that some one had landed and lighted it that afternoon during the thickest fall of snow. This, Gary suddenly concluded, was no act of devotion. It was a signal.

Incidents, like moths, came flocking out of the past three months, to encircle the *lampada* of Father Paul: —that day with Sasha when they had heard the voices in the fog, and the sound of the mysterious launch; Side-money's announcement of the modern new lamp on the cross; Seenia's reverent regard for the shrine she had served for so many years; the custom of the fishermen. What a country was this, he thought,

where piety and piracy went hand in hand! Reason told him that this new lamp must have been placed in the *lampada* weeks ago in preparation for tonight's work. Anywhere else in the world the thing would have aroused suspicion from the first, but, Gary saw now, some one fully acquainted with the custom of the fishermen had boldly used the tomb as a signal station. Equally clear was the fact that the offenders must have been well acquainted with the movements of all on Rocking Moon.

A foot of fresh snow lay about the tomb, but with the exception of his own tracks the white surface was smooth. Gary was walking along the margin of the flat top peering down to satisfy himself of this, when suddenly the deceptive white edge gave way and the next moment he was sprawling in a drift on the ground. He dashed his hand across his face to wipe the melting flakes from his eyes, and in order to rise from his awkward position, placed a hand firmly against one of the logs forming the end wall. There was a creaking sound, and to his amazement the log swung in like a door.

He thrust his head into the dark opening and was met by the smell of damp gunny-sacks. It was the work of but a moment to scramble once more to the top of the tomb and bring down the lighted lamp.

As he turned the reflected light into the narrow chamber, white log walls sprang out in horizontal ridges. In the center of the sandy floor, ringed about with footprints, lay a small mound of dark-stained gunny-sacks. About the base logs blades of rice-grass had grown in under the foundation and died in writhing, worm-like attitudes. At the farther end, where a

heavy upright marked the base of the cross, lay a roll covered with black oilcloth.

While these impressions flashed and photographed themselves on his brain, Gary set the lamp down and crawled in after it. He began lifting the gunny-sacks one by one. At the bottom of the heap lay a smooth, tapering, three-foot board, and two small steel traps. The Colonel was right, after all. Alexander had been caught in a steel trap. If the plucky little fox had not torn his own foot away his skin would now be drying on that stretcher.

Two steel traps and one stretcher! The meagerness of the outfit in the tomb contrasted with the wholesale stealing of the afternoon was strikingly incongruous. It seemed hardly possible that the same pirates who had walked off with fifty foxes, would risk detection by setting out two steel traps. Was it possible that two robber gangs were poaching on Rocking Moon?

Gary reached over and laying hold of the bundle at the base of the cross, unrolled it. Two fox skins fell out. This, he told himself, was no Alaskan's work. No Aleut or creole would desecrate the tomb of the old monk by using it, not only as a signal station and as a cache for stolen furs, but also as a skinning house. This was the work of a white man.

Still crouching, the young man rolled the skins into the oilcloth again and reached to pick up the cord which had encircled the bundle. As he stooped the Colonel's Toad-stabber in the pocket of his mackinaw shifted and began to slip. The edge of the clumsy sheath held on the pocket-flap, but the knife itself came sliding out. Instinctively Gary sprang back to

save his foot. The knife, heavy blade overbalancing the light handle, plunged point first, burying itself in the sand up to the hilt.

With an exclamation of irritation, Gary grasped the handle and gave it a pull. It did not move. The point was firmly embedded in something six inches below the surface.

"What the devil—" he muttered, as he gave it another jerk. It came away and he thrust it hastily into its sheath as he turned to leave.

Why he suddenly decided to find out what the knife blade had encountered he never was able to tell afterward; but a moment later, with the stretching board as a shovel, he was digging away the sand at the base of the cross.

His mind was so full of Sasha's misfortune that he was only faintly surprised when he lifted out a flat box, bound with tarnished brass. It was little over a foot square and the mark of his knife showed plainly in the lid.

Hurriedly filling the hole again, he replaced the roll and piled the gunny-sacks back, arranging everything as he had found it, for he wished to keep the owner of the traps in ignorance of his entrance to the tomb. Already a plan was taking form in his mind.

Just as he finished the work the lamp gave a feeble splutter and went out. He picked it up, tucked the box under his arm and made his way to the long, narrow opening that marked the swinging log.

Outside he obliterated the telltale marks of his entrance by tramping a path around the tomb, kicking the snow until all sides were equally disturbed; then, after returning the lamp to the *lampada,* he hastened

down to the beach, and shoved the brass-bound box into the bow of the kayak before he launched it.

Fifteen minutes later he entered the living-room of the ranch-house where the lights were burning just as he had left them. It was very still everywhere. The absence of the *Simmie and Ann* at the float gave proof that Side-money had not yet returned, though he had been gone over seven hours. But—in view of the thing he planned to do, Gary did not regret the non-appearance of the helper.

Now that Gary was going into action on his own initiative, his blood began to course warmingly and his spirits to soar as he swiftly made his preparations. That mind which had so long refused to build fiction plots for him, was building again—only now it was working with facts. From the storehouse of his memory little incidents, words, looks, were crowding in on him, nudging one another, taking on new and significant meanings in the light of tonight's happenings. As he moved about he was mentally shifting incidents of the past two months, shifting them and fitting them together again like pieces of a cardboard puzzle. The effect was sketchy in the extreme, but he felt he was justified in going ahead with the wild plan he had conceived.

After putting on the warmest clothes he owned, he made up a small bundle of *beleek,* hardtack and milk chocolate—food that needed no cooking. He added several squares of camphor gum from the medicine chest, a large tin cup and an electric flash-light.

When he had stowed his outfit away in the bow of the kayak, he put out a day's food for the animals in the barn, watered them and returned to the house

to extinguish the lights. He was about to write a note for Sasha telling her where he had gone, but reconsidered the matter. He would be back within twelve hours, and when Side-money returned—he had his reasons for keeping the helper in ignorance of his destination.

The brass-bound box lay on the living-room table. Gary who had forgotten it for the time being, took it up and began fumbling with the cover. It was locked. He lifted it in appraising hands and shook it. Whatever it contained was tightly wedged inside, for there was no sound. The thing could not belong to the fox-pirates who were using the tomb as a cache—the stains on the brass were too old for that. Perhaps—Like a flash it came to him. It held something connected with the religious ceremony customary in Father Anton's church. Gary had a moment's panic. "For the love of Pete!" he thought, overwhelmed with the sense of his own ridiculousness. "Here I've gone and rooted up some of the sacred relics!"

He gazed earnestly about the living-room to find a hiding-place for the box until his return. He could re-bury it then. The music cabinet, the book-cases, the buffet—all these were discarded as repositories, but when his eyes encountered the great gold-and-silver icon in the corner of the room, he advanced determinedly. A few minutes later the brass-bound box was safely hidden behind the holy picture, but the picture itself was slightly askew on its corner shelf.

When he stepped out on the veranda he found the sky entirely clear with pale berylline flushes playing in the north. As he swung hurriedly down to the float

the snow crisped under his boots, and the cold air stung in his nostrils, turning his breath to puffs of vapor ahead of him. Clear, cold weather promised a smooth sea, he thought, as he eased himself into the man-hole of the kayak.

With the first dip of his paddle the light craft shot out, furrowing the reflections of large stars glimmering on the dark surface of the bay.

Gary was embarking on an adventure so hazardous that even Nick Nash would have refused it. At the most treacherous season of the year, he, a cheechako, was setting out over miles of open sea in the smallest, crankiest craft known to man—a craft little longer and wider than himself. He was well aware that one of the quick-rising winds, common in the North, could roughen the ocean until his chances for life would be about one in fifty. He expected, of course, to encounter danger when he reached his destination; but now, like a boy with a new toy, he was enjoying the speed of his featherweight boat.

When he passed the low arm of Lampadny Point, he took his bearings by the tiny compass he had fastened to a thong in the deck of the kayak, and turning the prow eastward, headed out across the night waters toward the cave-pitted, mysterious Island of Oo-koon.

CHAPTER XXI

THE swish of water along the sides of the kayak told Gary that Rocking Moon must be falling rapidly behind him, although, being comparatively unfamiliar with his treacherous little boat, he could not risk turning his head to see. He sat flat on the bottom of the fragile, man-made shell, a speck under the starry sky, with only a thickness of seal-skin between him and the black depths of the ocean.

When he found himself well out beyond the lee of the islands where inky, slow-heaving rollers swept down from the northwest, he had moments of misgiving. The mystery, the vastness, the magnificent solitude filled him with an awe that had in it a touch of the primeval. Here was the loneliest place in the world. Here was Nature in its freest, most elemental form; Nature terribly beautiful, fearsomely grand, cruelly impersonal. He knew that one second of incautious steering, one miscalculation in regulating the stroke of his paddle, one unthinking shift of his body and he, helpless and fastened in the cockpit, would be hanging head down in the sea, under the capsized kayak. His was not the skill that enables the Aleut to right himself under such circumstances.

At first every muscle in him tensed when the tiny canoe headed starward, climbing the shimmering slope

that led to the crest of a roller. He relaxed for a moment on the safety of the summit, but again caught his breath in suspense at the downward plunge into a valley of the deep where the pale light of night was absent. It was a tremendous, soul-stirring experience to find himself rising from the trough of every wave, and by the puny man-strength of his own arms, speeding onward.

"What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" he thought, marveling as he became surer of himself. The quiet of the night, the knowledge of miles safely traveled, brought a new and intoxicating confidence in himself. This immensity, this potential power, this majestic, deliberate rhythm of the sea was subject to his hand! He was conscious of his mastery, yet at the same time filled with a great and reverent wonder —a wonder of the world and of himself. No longer did he feel insignificant, mean, in the scheme of things. He was a man, a master of the elements. In him was a spark of that mighty intelligent Force that molds the ether into worlds.

The miles slipped behind him. His head, though still aching, troubled him less; but his legs, unaccustomed to such forced inaction, cramped painfully. Yet, he considered himself fortunate that no wind had come up to stir the slumbering swells.

He wondered where Sasha was, little dreaming that at the same moment the girl was standing in the wheelhouse of the *Seal Pup* thinking of him as the launch carried her home to Rocking Moon from the radio station.

He was going more easily now. Whenever the little kayak lifted to the crests of rollers he could see Oo-

koon looming ahead through the semi-transparency of the Northern night. Intent on these glimpses, he was startled by a gigantic sigh almost at his elbow. He was more amazed when he saw, rounding slowly and lazily from the dark waters, the glistening back of a white whale—the Ghost whale, the beluga of the Arctic.

Gary was fascinated and not a little apprehensive. He paddled with more haste. Leisurely the creature disappeared, only to come up again beside him farther on. It continued, with mechanical regularity, to show itself, always at the same distance from the kayak. It seemed almost as if the friendly monster had constituted itself a bodyguard for the little craft, and Gary wondered if the great white whale intended keeping abreast of him as far as Oo-koon. He was beginning to feel an uneasy companionship with the beluga when suddenly it sank and he saw it no more.

Under the paling stars, the night took on a deeper dusk as he drew near his destination. He had been going over in his mind all that Seenia had told him of the volcanic island where he was so soon to land. It was not more than six miles in length, and Nash's fox-ranch occupied the only sheltered place on its coast, near the great Cave at the head of a Cove. But Gary had no intention of landing at the Cove. He could not afford to run the risk of being sighted by the pirate launch—if it had gone in there. Instead, he paddled on past the gray-white slopes rising from dark cliffs abruptly stopped to face the sea. When he swung his prow and began to move along the coast, rocks awash appeared between him and the shore, and even in the dim light he could see streaks of foam licking the blackened basaltic feet of Oo-koon. The

slapping sound of the ocean sucking in and out of unseen caves struck strangely on his ears.

He knew he was doing a foolhardy thing in picking his way thus along an unknown coast-line in the morning dusk. True, his study of charts in the wheel-house of the *Simmie and Ann* had given him some knowledge of the contour of Oo-koon and the soundings, but nevertheless he might run on a submerged rock at any moment, and the slightest contact would split the frail kayak open like a dried bladder on the point of a knife. Yet, he must make a landing before daylight; he must get out of the kayak soon, too, because of the intolerable pain in his cramped legs. He could hardly control the desire to draw them up, to turn over, to do anything that would ease them. They were cold, too, though his body was sweating from the exertion of paddling.

He recalled a peculiar reef on the outer beach of Oo-koon about a mile from the entrance to the Cove. It was shaped on the chart like a curve of a fish-hook. Luck was with him, for he recognized it at last putting out as he had pictured it. It broke the swells of the ocean, and as he drew nearer to it he saw that it sheltered a tiny beach. He guided his craft cautiously into the quieter waters behind the reef and headed for the shore.

As he made his landing on a shingle of crushed pumice stone, he noted a huge sign against the low bluff backing the beach. It was blurred and indistinct in the faint light, but he made out the words:

FOX ISLAND

NO TRESPASSING

"They could shoot me on sight and be within the law," he thought, while he made an effort to rise from the cockpit of the kayak. His legs refused to support him until he had spent some minutes rubbing them and going through setting-up exercises. When he could walk he hoisted the kayak on his back and started for the bank beyond the sign.

The bluff proved to be a low wall of blackened, frost-riven breccia eaten away into hollows and openings that yawned in the dusk. Caves, he reflected; fit and gloomy dwellings for the spirits of the Aleut dead who loved in life the sound of the curious, lapping sea. From the top of the bank the twilit, snowy slope of Oo-koon rose to the crater five thousand feet above. The character of the beach, bared now by the receding tide, spoke eloquently of a time when eruptive rock and pumice stone had rolled from the very lip of that crater to the water's edge.

Gary let the kayak slide from his back in front of the largest of the caves near the sign, and a moment later was inside flashing his electric torch about the cavern. It was dry and the floor of powdered pumice sloped upward to the end perhaps fifty feet back. Driftwood and dried kelp, brought in by long-past stormy tides, were scattered here and there. It proved an ideal hiding place for the kayak.

Though his head still ached dully, the cramps had gone from his legs and he was ravenously hungry. Hastily taking the tin cup from the toe of the kayak, he crammed it full of snow, and placing a square of camphor gum on a drift log set it afire. By holding the cup over the tiny blaze a short time, he made himself a boiling hot cup of tea, which he drank,

blessing his partner in Siberia who had taught him this trick of the trail.

With a pocket full of hard-tack and *beleek,* he started out along the beach in the direction of the Cove, chewing a piece of the dried fish with Indian-like relish. The snow decided him to chance going the whole way at the edge of the surf which would erase his foot-prints—a necessary precaution should he find it expedient to keep his visit a secret. Whether he could make it he did not know, but it was the only way that offered, outside of the kayak. Without betraying his presence he must see the fox-ranch of Oo-koon before daylight came.

He had little difficulty getting past the few jutting cliffs that barred his way, and in a short time he was rounding a point from whence he could look up the narrow, deep, horse-shoe cove where he knew the ranch was situated. Another huge sign marked this point, and he slipped behind it while he scanned the waters of the inlet—mirror-like, calm and shadow-bordered in the first pale light of dawn.

At the right of the cove lay a green launch, which he had never before seen. It was broadside in such a way as partially to hide from view the float behind it. Despite the early hour, two men sat on the float with their backs to Gary, a couple of powerful gasoline lanterns on boxes throwing reflected lights over their bowed heads. The young man looked in vain for houses near the landing, until smoke rising from a snowy knoll enlightened him. Then he remembered —there were no houses on Oo-koon. Nicholas Nash was utilizing the barabaras already there—the native houses built more than half underground and roofed

with three or four feet of sod until they resembled mounds of earth. He could make out several of these now, although smoke came from only one. The fox pens were back of the barabaras—corrals larger than those on Rocking Moon, for Nash had told Colonel Jeff he was trying to raise his blue foxes in captivity. Back of the pens a few static, scrawny spruce trees stood forth, black against the grey-white barren land that rolled upward toward the dim crater of Oo-koon. In the pallor of the dawn, it was a bleak and chilling scene, suggestive, in some subtle way, of sombre and gruesome things—poignantly so when Gary remembered the hospitable beauty of the Rocking Moon ranch. He wondered where the Cave of Oo-koon might be. While Seenia had often told him of it, she had never mentioned its exact location nor described its entrance.

With his feet slipping precariously on the weed-covered rocks, Gary crept forward along the shadow of the cliff. He wanted to see what kept the men on the float so busy. He noted that the out-going tide had formed an eddy just off shore, and something was bobbing up and down as it slowly circled between two big boulders. As a freak of the current brought the thing nearer to him, he smothered an exclamation. It was a bloody carcass—the body of a skinned fox.

He crept on, flattening himself against the rocks until he dropped behind a boulder at the water's edge, from which point of vantage he had an unobstructed view of the float.

The men were sitting on boxes placed between two mounds—one a small one, one larger. Although it was not zero weather, an oil heater threw its reflected

warmth on them. Gary experienced a feeling of nausea as he looked at the scene, doubly ghastly under the mixed light of dawn and the lantern's glare.

The men were swiftly, skillfully stripping steaming pelts from foxes they took from the smaller mound, and tossing the grisly, blood-red carcasses to the other. They had the appearance of having been hours at work. But why, he asked himself, should they work by lantern light? Reason brought him the answer. All the happenings of the last few months which he had dismissed as casual, until tonight, were culminated now in this gruesome drama of the float. He knew, as well as if he were looking at the tattooed brand in the ears of those green pelts that there lay the fifty foxes which he had fed the day before in the pens of Sasha Larianoff.

The sight filled him with a flaming anger, a reckless disregard of consequences, but he curbed his first impulse toward violence and forced his mind to think calmly. The law demands proof of a theft and sure as he was himself, he could do nothing until he had proof. He must see the brand on those foxes before he left Oo-koon. He must see it without he himself being seen. The men on the float were strangers to him, but without a doubt they knew him. They, perhaps, thought him safely bound and tied to the great iron kettle in the barn at Rocking Moon. If they discovered him here . . . He tightened his lips and dismissed the thought.

He knew now there would be no robbery on Oo-koon. But Nash—what was his part in these piratical moves? Could it be that he knew of this outrage? The idea was too monstrous. Although Gary had no

love for the trader, and despised his double dealing in the matter of women, he felt that Nash must be ignorant of the raid on Rocking Moon. Something underhanded was going on here at Oo-koon, but the solving of the problem must be left until later. Gary decided to retrace his steps to his own cave and wait there until nightfall before he continued his investigations. Indeed, he was forced to wait, for daylight was coming fast.

Rising from his cramped position behind the dripping boulder with the intent to make his way back around the jutting bluff, he found that he had advanced farther than was wise in the growing light. Should the workers on the float turn their heads as he was darting around the cliff, he was sure to be discovered. His mind was busy with this complication when another presented itself. The door of the barabara opened and a third man came out with a load on his shoulder. To the trapped Gary it seemed that the new arrival was looking directly at the boulder behind which he crouched.

The man advanced to the float, threw down his pack, and then, to Gary's alarm, came on. Had the fellow seen him and was he coming to investigate? Gary looked wildly about him for some place to hide. He stood on basaltic rock swept clean of sand, so there were no footprints to betray him. Ten feet back rose the face of rugged cliffs, fissured breccia and lava formation eroded until it resembled the frontage of some dark, sea-carved glacier. The advancing man turned to shout a direction to his comrades on the float, and in that second of time Gary darted into a wide, stony crevasse.

With his eyes on the opening, through which he could see a perpendicular sliver of the Cove and farther shore, he kept backing in. The sliver of vision diminished, the dark walls widened, and the sky was shut off. Suddenly he found himself in the semi-gloom of a cavern. The uneven floor sloped upward, and save for some oars and old ropes at one side it was empty. The place smelled of dried salt brine and evidently the sea came in at extreme high tide. Gary hazarded one flash of his light toward the back wall. Plutonic forces had crevassed and columned it with gargoyled outcroppings that brought to mind the weird giant stone figures of Easter Island. He plunged into an opening that promised concealment, and with his foot feeling the way ahead of him, advanced into the inky blackness.

He went on and on, and was just about to risk another flash of his electric torch when he came up flat against a wall. Instinctively his hands went out to feel the extent of it. One struck bare rock. The other went on in unobstructed space. His light revealed a gigantic wedge of rock projecting diagonally into the narrow corridor, leaving a two-foot opening between its point and the other wall.

Gary slipped in through the passage. The quick sweep of his circling light gave him impressions of great space; of black walls, high and wide apart, of rocky shelves, piles of provisions and—He swore wonderingly under his breath. Had he blundered into the Cave of Oo-koon? Were those mummies, those bale-like things that——

He switched off his light and his heart missed a beat. In the dark passage behind him the un-

mistakable clink of hob-nails sounded on the stony floor.

The man he sought to escape was following him into the Cave!

CHAPTER XXII

GARY made sure of the advancing footsteps, then ran to the pile of provisions and clambered up to a shelf above. He winced in the darkness as his hand came in contact with the cold surface of the bales, but a second later he had wedged himself behind them.

The clink of the hob-nails rang nearer, now in the passage, now by the stone wedge, then in the Cave below. The reflection of a swinging lantern light played dimly on the rocks above Gary's head. A moment more would tell whether or not he had been seen and followed.

There came the sound of a stumble, a muttered curse and a turning over of boxes. Gary relaxed. The man was looking for something in the stores. Apparently he found it for the light disappeared and his departure was marked by the diminishing clink of his hob-nailed boots.

For a time Gary lay, every sense concentrated on listening; then gradually he became conscious of smells —commonplace smells so utterly incongruous with his ideas of the mystic mummy Cave that he found his sense of humor stirring. There were odors of fox skins, dried fish, onions, gasoline and—acridly dominant, the unmistakable reek of *macoola.* That this illicit brew should be fermenting in the historic vault of Oo-koon, seemed to Gary the last touch of irreverent

defiance flung at the gods of the past. Still, now that the weather was getting colder, it was probably the only place where the concoction ran no chance of chilling.

Encouraged by the continued silence, he was about to raise himself and flash on his light to get a better look at his surroundings, when he heard again the ring of boots and voices. The men stamped into the cavern —three of them, apparently.

"Thunderation! What a mess!" Something hit the floor. "It's like livin' in a bloody slaughter house!" came a heavy growl.

"Aw-w-w, can it!" mocked a younger voice. "You're gettin' mighty dainty all of a sudden, ain't you, Steve! See here—you stay behind and set them stretchers up to dry. Me'n Mack'll pack the pelts to you."

A scuffing noise rose from below. The man addressed as Steve was not silenced.

"Well, ain't we got a kick comin'?" he protested sulkily. "Look at the way Con side-tracked all this here slimy skinning business by galivantin' off to Rezanoff the minute we pulled this job last night."

"Stow it—stow it, Steve. You're always peddling gloom!" came the other voice. "You know he had to beat it to show up to the Boss. He'll be back this morning, maybe." Again came the slam of something flung to the floor.

"This mornin'—he-ell!" the injured voice of Steve was beginning, but the sound of receding footsteps told that his two companions had not waited to hear his complaint; and Gary heard him cursing softly but fervently to himself as he shifted the stretched fox skins.

Con! This name had been unusual enough to fasten

itself in Gary's mind the first time he heard it, some weeks previously, in the store at Rezanoff. One of the clerks had told him Con was Nash's new keeper on the ranch at Oo-koon. Hearing it as he lay bound in the barn at Rocking Moon, and seeing the pirate launch disappearing in the direction of Oo-koon, had been two deciding factors in sending the cheechako off on a secret visit to the Island.

It was not long before the two men re-entered the cavern with another load of green pelts. They had no sooner thrown them to the floor than Steve's voice was again raised in complaint.

"Aw, cut it out!" interrupted the young voice. "You'd kick if you was going to be hung. Here we've made the biggest haul of the season and you——"

"Biggest haul—say, you make me sick, Jim. Plumb sick! We ain't off the rocks yet by a durned sight, an' you talk like the whole business was settled an' done for. . . . Young feller—there's a helluva big chance to slip up on this yet, an' don't you forget it. When a guy starts mixin' petticoats an' business, like the Boss's done lately, it means breakers ahead! You just mark my words! *One* petticoat's bad enough, but when a man starts playin' the field—that mean's he ain't thinkin' of business, an' when he *ain't* thinkin' of business, that's when somebody slips somethin' over on him, and things start to go wrong—savey?"

"Quit your belly-achin'!" came the bored young tones of Jim. "That's a sign you're gettin' old, and they'll be plantin' you one o' these days. I don't begrudge no man playin' the field—I'm goin' to do the same thing myself next spring when I hit 'Frisco with a wad in my pocket. Say—I'll be scatterin' corn for the swell

little chickens the whole length o' Powell Street, *I* will!"

"For criminey sake, Jim!" the third man blared impatiently. "Break away, can't you, and let's get these here pelts under cover! I want to turn in and get some sleep before the Boss comes blowing in."

"Right-o, Mack, ol' de-ah! Lead on, an' I'll be scrapin' your heels!" Jim's whistling marked his cheerful exit.

After some time the two transporters of skins threw their last loads on the floor with profane satisfaction. Gary, more puzzled now than ever, was hoping they would continue their conversation and enlighten him as to the part Nash played in this wholesale robbery, if any. But while the men set up the stretchers they spoke only of the condition of other fox pelts which had been drying in the Cave for some days.

The voice of the man addressed as Mack sounded at last:

"Say, I don't know what you guys is going to do—but I'm going to hit the hay pretty pronto. I'm all in. Know what time it is?—seven o'clock, that's what. I'm on a strike till noon, anyway. This all night business don't make no hit with *me*."

"You should worry about any more all night business, Mack. This is the last haul of the season—and now we can loaf while the Boss runs the risk," declared Jim. "Speakin' of sleep—I wonder how that poor boob of a cheechako is restin' now. Gosh, I hated to bean that guy, someway, him sittin' there so chummy with that little runt fox. . . . Kinda wish I'd put his coat over him—it's gettin' colder 'n blazes out."

"Aw, you're too soft-hearted to be piratin'!" Steve was plainly disgusted. "You'd be pretty in a young ladies' boardin'-school. Come on—let's go to bed if we're goin'."

Their heavy boots thumped along the stony floor, then came a peculiar soft and sliding sound, after which silence shut down with curious abruptness. Gary, on his shelf, lay in darkness waiting until he was sure there was no chance of their returning for some forgotten thing. He had decided to examine the contents of the Cave, the brands on the fox skins, and then make his escape while the men slept.

He counted off fifteen minutes—though to him the time seemed an hour; then eased himself about and switching on his light, stood up. As he played it along the rocky shelf he was astonished to find it piled with bale after bale of fox skins, turned fur side in. Roughly estimated he decided there must be nearly eight hundred!

He scrambled down over sacks of flour and boxes of canned goods stored beneath a tarpaulin. His torch revealed the farther side of the cavern lined with the stretched fresh pelts of foxes. Grease and blood glistened in the light. Although there was no doubt in his mind that these were Sasha's animals, he examined the ears of a dozen or more. Each one was tattooed with the brand RM-1.

Curious to see if the dried skins on the frames bore a mark, he turned an ear, then another, and another. Each carried either RM-1, or RM.

Gary swore. Not only the fifty young animals in the pen had been stolen, then, but the pirates had previously made hauls on Rocking Moon! But how,

when both he and Side-money had been watching the beaches? Side-money—understanding was beginning to dawn. He shook his head, leaving this part of the problem for later consideration, and turned his light toward the spot where the passageway should be. The glow revealed nothing but solid walls. With a sense of apprehension, Gary advanced and made a closer inspection. He could detect neither the stone wedge nor the opening.

Feeling that some sinister magic had been practiced on him, he began foot by foot, to examine the wall of the cave. There was no break, but he found where the stone wedge had apparently slid across the passage into the opposite wall. He tried to pull the barrier aside, only to discover a surface so smooth that his hands found no hold on it.

Standing in the darkness he knew, for a moment, the panic of a trapped thing. Then, remembering Seenia's account of a crack in the wall which admitted air from the outside, he played his light on the high ceiling.

The bright ray moved slowly over half the length of the vault, disclosing nothing but black, barren rock; then suddenly, high in the shadows, it found and lingered on a horrible, swaying face. Gary thrilled with pure terror, until he realized he was looking at the ghastly dried grin of an Aleut mummy.

He saw it clearly now, suspended from the rocky ceiling in a three-foot mummy-case. Swinging in a fine net of sinew, the age-blackened fiber matting covered the body which had been bound and dried in a squatting position. Some one had torn away the matting over the head, and the parchment-like face, eyeless, noseless, but agape with the hideous, amorphous

smile of the dead, nodded knowingly down under a thatch of black hair.

With the feeling that he was somehow taking part in one of the wild adventure tales he had once written, Gary moved his light along over the top of the cavern; it fell only on bare spaces. There was only one mummy left in the Cave of Oo-koon. But—he and this gruesome relic of the past were entombed together.

Thinking to conserve his battery, he switched off the torch, and was instantly plunged into darkness so thick that it was tangible; silence so intense that it listened. . . . Despite all his efforts to the contrary, weird, new fears began to blow slyly upon him. The blackness became a background for the horribly merry face nodding from the ceiling; the crafty silence but a preparation for a sudden cackle of cadaverous mirth. He cursed his imagination, but suddenly he knew things he had pondered over hitherto, and been unable to understand. He was aware of a monstrous and barbaric knowledge that put him, a man of the twentieth century, in perfect accord with those Aleuts who believed that the Shadows of the dead still lived in caves along the sea,—lived ready to bring good or evil to those in the flesh who called upon them in times of sorrow and danger. He knew the wild and furious ecstasy of those native hunters who danced naked under the moon to the hollow tautophony of drums and tambourines, and prostrated themselves in pagan abasement before temporary idols made of wood. He was an understanding worshiper in those Eleusinian-like mysteries where women were banished and——

"What the devil's the matter with me!" he cried aloud to break the uncanny spell; and flashing on his

light he began stamping impatiently up and down the Cave. He shook his head to free himself of the strange thoughts—or were they recollections? The idea startled him for a moment. Then he chuckled. He was in need of sleep, he told himself, either that or—he felt a glow of cheerfulness—he was getting back his capacity for writing fiction.

He walked over to the stone wedge to make another attempt at freedom, and began examining it in the glow of his torch. Suddenly he stiffened, wondering if his imagination were again playing him false. Under his hand the stony wall was slowly moving. He watched it a second to make certain, then snapping off his light leaped across the Cave and scrambled back to the shelf.

As he settled himself behind the fox skins he slipped an arm between two bales and peered down through the opening. Again he caught that peculiar sliding noise that had marked the exit of the men earlier in the day. The darkness vanished as a lantern was set high on a box, and Gary nearly betrayed himself by an exclamation of astonishment.

Below him was a tall figure in a robe of red fox skins. As he looked the arms came up wing-like on each side of the body, the robe slipped to the floor, and the light fell golden on the exquisite rounded limbs of a woman, naked except for moccasins. Her thick, black hair fell to her knees, and reaching to her shoulders, in incongruous hideousness, was a wooden mask, flat-nosed, eyeless, with wooden teeth pegged into a grinning, thin-lipped mouth.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE figure, like some fantastic creature of fable, stood poised a moment, grotesque mask topping a body of naked loveliness. Then slowly, with high-lifted feet, it advanced and fell on its knees below the swinging mummy of the whaler. After a low, barbaric chant of supplication, the woman rose and with outstretched arms, and slender feet never leaving the floor, began a dance that was weirdly magnified in the moving shadows on the opposite wall.

It was a dance of profound silence; of dreamy revolutions, lingering and continuous, in which the rounded arms coiled and uncoiled, spiraled and floated about the stolid wooden face, and the half-veiled hips undulated with the swinging torso. It was suggestive of brown kelp floating on the surface of a summer sea; of the stillness and calm of ocean depths; of strange marine growths spreading languorous leaves and swaying in the passing of great white whales.

Gary held his breath as he watched this dance no other living white man had looked upon—the dance of the lost Mask of Jade. The dance that Seenia had told him was banished and forgotten since the Russians came. Forgotten—yet here was a woman of his own time using it, as of old, to win the favor of a whaler in the ashen land of the dead!

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Gary watched the lantern-light gleam along her slender limbs, showing them pearl-white one moment, amber and gold the next. Who was she? All sorts of wild surmises flitted through his mind—snatches from the tales of Rider Haggard; weird memories from stories of the South Seas. Yet not one was as bizarre as the thing that was actually going on below him at the moment. The writer in him, alive now, told him that he could never use such material as this convincingly. It was too improbable, too fantastic for twentieth century belief.

The dancer stood still a moment, her arms extended; then sank once more to her knees in the odd, huddled posture of supplication. When she rose there was an instant when Gary unconsciously risked detection by leaning too far out, for he thought she was going to take off the mask. One slim hand went to the strap behind her head, but it was for the purpose of adjusting, instead of removing it. He remembered, then, that the supplicating maiden, if she would live, must look upon nothing but her own feet through the nostril openings of the mask.

She gathered the red fox robe from the floor and flung it about her, reaching for the lantern on her way to the stone wedge. Gary saw her pull a plug from the floor, and gradually the light was shut off as the wedge slid across the opening with the peculiar noise he had heard before. When he turned on his own light, only the blank stone wall lay before him.

He was not concerned now about it, for he had made up his mind to remain in the Cave until the return of the men, who, according to their morning conversation, were coming back to flense the green fox skins. There

were many things Gary wanted to know about the Island of Oo-koon, before he left it.

He lay on the shelf thinking of all that had happened since Sasha left Rocking Moon for Kodiak. It did not seem possible that only thirty-six hours had elapsed since he had said good-bye to her. Intent on making changes in the plans he had formed, he closed his eyes in the darkness, forgetful of the mummy and his surroundings, forgetful, too, of the fact that he had not been to bed for two nights. He was impatient with himself when time and again he started back from the edge of sleep; yet, despite all his efforts at wakefulness, physical fatigue little by little obscured his mind and he drifted off into a leaden slumber.

He woke to the sound of voices and activity below him, and the nearby soft wheezing of a gasoline lamp. Momentarily bewildered, he lay in the coffin-like space between the baled skins and the wall, blinking up at the lighted rocks above his head. By degrees his senses found their way back into accustomed channels and he remembered where he was. He dared not risk detection by turning on his side to look down on the men, but he identified them by their voices, and soon detected a new one which rang with a note of authority.

"Hey, there, Steve!" it called. "You take those skins off the stretchers over there in the corner, and turn 'em to see how they look. Be sure to put all the RM's in one bunch, and don't get 'em mixed with the others—Boss's orders, and you better look sharp!"

"Aw, t' ell with the Boss's orders!" came the pessimistic voice of Steve. "It's just our luck to get bilked out of the best pelts of the lot—and us takin' all the risk in the business, Con."

Gary realized that the wandering Con had returned from Rezanoff.

"Risk—my foot, Steve!" the new voice replied briskly. "I'd like to know where we'd all be now, if we hadn't fallen in with the Boss. Waitin' trial in the Juneau jail, most likely. I tell you we were trapped good and pretty down there on Prince William's Sound when he came along with his proposition. Mighty little good the pelts would do us, if we couldn't get 'em out of the country."

"Oh, we'd a got 'em out all right," retorted Steve. "Why, say—*I*——"

"*You?* Huh!" put in Con with easy contempt. "All you can do is crab. You never in a blue moon would have thought of running those skins out by way of Siberia and Japan! None of us would. And even if we had, it wouldn't have done us a speck of good. You've got to know the ropes to put a thing like that over."

There was a scraping and scuffing of feet along the stony floor.

Steve again took up his grievances. "Well, I don't like this way of doin' business, anyway. He's got freak notions, the Boss has. Look at that Naked Island haul of our'n! We could just as well scooped in a dozen more foxes—but no. Just because he knows how many pairs the feller has, he gives his orders, and we must leave the guy with enough to start in again. And that Lone Goose haul—it was the same way there, and with every trick we've pulled since we got in with him. Did ya ever stop to figger how much we're out by all that, Con? No, not you. You guys let him herd you round like a bunch o' malamutes.

Hey, Jim!" he broke off. "Gimme a match, will you?"

"I will not," declined Jim, emphatically cheerful. "No smoking goes in here with all that gasoline stored in the corner, you mutt. An' we'd better speed up if we're going to get these here skins flensed before the Boss gets here."

"Gets here—nothin'! He'll not get here this afternoon. It's blowing up a gale o' wind now, and besides—where there's a petticoat concerned he's got a head like a pot o' mush." Steve was unmistakably radiating disgust.

"For *cri-min-ey* sake, Steve, button up your lip! The Boss had somethin' besides mush in his head when he planted men on all the islands due for a visit from us; and when he planned that floating trap that took pretty near all the risk out o' poaching. By gosh, there wasn't another man on earth would 'a' thought of that trap!"

Above on his shelf, Gary's heart beat faster as he listened to the poaching methods of Con and his gang.

"Say, that trap has all them Federal sleuths guessing from Ketchikan to Seward!" Jim laughed like a boy who has just finished playing a trick on his schoolteacher. "They're still scratchin' their heads over how them Southeastern robberies was pulled! Gosh! It sure does me good to think of us layin' off shore in our launch, cozy as cooties in a flannel shirt, while the old floatin' trap does the business ashore! Talk about Captain Kidd! Oh—boy!"

The others joined his laugh. In the general conversation that followed Gary heard enough to enlighten him as to the operation of the floating trap.

It was a small flat-bottomed boat, he learned, built with a flat-roofed house in the middle, much like the feeding-stations used on some fox islands. In the top was a trap-door balanced in the middle. The weight of an animal on one end of it caused it to swing downward, letting the creature fall to the compartment beneath, after which the door went back into place.

This contraption was towed ashore and hidden among the rocks, or in a cut in a lonely part of the island selected for poaching. Fox-food, and oil of anise were placed on the top of the house, and the pirates then rowed back to their waiting launch, after fastening a long line to the trap. They could lie off an island indefinitely, without attracting any more attention than a fishing craft.

With the fall of the tide, the trap was left high and dry on the beach. The hungry and curious foxes, attracted by the smell of the anise and the food, swarmed over the trap-door to get at it, and were dropped down inside. When the tide was right again, the pirates, on their launch, wound up the rope on a windlass and without leaving their anchorage, drew aboard the precious boat load of live plunder.

Remembering the fishermen's boats that had anchored off Rocking Moon at various times, Gary was now sure that over half of Sasha's foxes had been captured in the floating trap—with Side-money's assistance. He began to fear that she had lost all her stock. Lost it as live stock, he mentally amended, for he intended that the pelts at least should be hers, if he had to do battle with the whole pirate gang and the unknown Boss himself.

"An' not one o' them pussy-footed Gover'ment men

would ever guess we had our fur cached in the Cave of Oo-koon, either!" gloated Jim. "That was another slick trick, pickin' out a place like this where all the natives is afraid to stick their noses. But, gee, Con! What if one o' them officers would get on to it and come here!" Jim's voice held a note of alarm.

"Don't go borrowin' trouble, you guys. Only a few of us knows how to get by that wedge when it's closed. Even if one o' them did get in here, all we have to do is pull the plug and she closes up like a clam shell. He couldn't get out till some one let him out."

"But that woman knows all about the caves, an' don't you forget it," gloomed Steve, as the scraping of the skins went on.

"Well, she don't know these pelts are—well, what you might call spoils of the chase," said Jim.

"Maybe not yet—but how long will it be before she does know? It's this cursed woman business and the Rocking Moon tomfoolery that's got my goat. Why shouldn't we have these RM skins, as well as the others? They ain't a hide in the rest of the outfit that can compare with 'em—look at this—" there came the rustle of a dried pelt as if Steve was shaking it out to show the lustre of the fur.

"Stevie, old dear, thou shalt not covet an RM Blue," came the mocking young voice of Jim. "You got about as much chance of gettin' one as—as you had of getting—the *woman* to kiss you. Ha! ha! ha! How's that? You know what happened to you that day you followed her in here to risk one eye!"

A growling curse rumbled from Steve. "The hell-cat! She laid my cheek open as if she had claws!"

"But that was no nice way to act, Stee-ven, my

de-ah!" Jim went on in mock reproof. "Spyin' on a lady what's going in naked to shimmy out a prayer to the Spirits! Oh, naughty, naughty!"

The general laugh which followed this sally nearly drowned Steve's furious tones. "Aw, you guys make me sick!" he was shouting when he finally made himself heard. "You sit round like a Sunday-school class an' do whatever you're told. You know dam' well none of you was for pullin' this Rocking Moon stunt, an' then the Boss only cheeps, an' you go ahead an' do it like good little boys——"

"Criminey sakes, Steve! Dry up! We had to tackle Rocking Moon when things fell just right. That half-breed Feodor'll be back in a few days, to say nothing of the old dude Father Anton."

"Maybe he'll tuck up his petticoats and go to work now," Con said with a chuckle. "I've got no use for these missionaries. They've put the jinx on tradin' with the natives. I was hopin' he'd gone to kingdom come when the ship went down, but Nash came in with word to Rezanoff this mornin' that he was saved and will be back in a few days."

"That shipwreck happened pretty for us, didn't it? We couldn't have had things fall better. I feel kinda sorry for the girl, though."

"Funny how Nash is crazy stuck after that red-headed girl of the priest," commented Con. "Now, *I'd* rather have this woman on the Island, myself. A jane who'd just as soon give you a clout on the jaw as not. Eh, there, Steve!"

"Not for little Jimmie, though," put in that youth. "I like 'em small an' dainty. I glimpsed that little red-topped pulse-quickener yesterday mornin' when Nash

was taking her to Kodiak to the radio station, an' believe me—she's the class! Side-money told me the cheechako Tynan is gone on her, too. Said it was touch and go between him an' Nash, but that Nash'd graze the doors of the penitentiary to get what he wants; and the cheechako, for all he talks like a highbrow, is dead broke. Wonder how the poor guy is this afternoon."

"Oh, he's loose by now. The *Seal Pup* pulled out from Rezanoff for Rocking Moon about ten o'clock this morning with the whole caboodle aboard—the girl, Colonel Jeff and that Aleut witch, Seenia," informed Con. "I wonder what Nash said to the girl when they found all the foxes gone? He must 'a' been a helluva lot of comfort to her."

"I hope Side-money measured the oil in that lamp on the tomb, so it burned out before any of 'em got back—that's all I hope," worried Steve.

"Trust Side-money, he's wise," assured Jim. "Pretty soft snap he had, though, just putting the *Simmie an' Ann's* engine on the bum, an' floatin' round on the bounding billow." After a pause he said: "Say, I'm dry as a drug-store sponge. If any of you guys want a drink I'll go out and get a pail of water. Guess I'll turn down this oil stove, too, we don't need any more heat in here."

"I'd like a snifter of *macoola,* myself," answered Steve. "But the Boss'd raise Cain if he came back and found we'd tapped his barrel."

There was the echoing of retreating footsteps while the men below discussed the batch of *macoola* fermenting in a barrel near the provisions.

Jim returned with the water and the thirsty Gary

listened longingly to the gulping sounds below as the dipper passed from hand to hand.

"It's blowing up a gale o' wind outside," Jim informed his companions. "I don't think the Boss can get here this afternoon. There's no use takin' chances, you know."

"The devil takes care of his own, Jim. He'll make it all right. He must be on pins and needles to hear how we came out—it means a lot to him, this haul."

As the flensing of the skins went on, the talk drifted to other matters—the price of furs in the London market; the best city in which to spend money and a few idle months; the chances for making a quick fortune in Siberia. To Gary, thirsty and stiff on his rocky shelf, the time seemed interminable. Yet fifty skins had to be scraped and put into shape for drying, and others taken from their stretchers and made into bundles. He began to long for supper time, when he hoped the men would leave for their meal at the barabara. But the grumbling Steve was elected to prepare supper, and the men left two at a time so that always others were working.

The hours crawled by. Now that the stone wedge stood back from the opening of the Cave, the hollow roar of surf came echoing in from the Cove. From the men's conversation it was evident that a storm was brewing and Gary thought uneasily of his kayak, and the long trip he must make in it. A heavy sea would keep him a prisoner on the Island indefinitely.

It was long after supper-time when Con commanded one of the men to go down and see that the launches were moored securely to the float. Jim lighted a lantern

and departed. The scrape of flensing-knives and the sizzle of the gasoline lamp were the only sounds for a while; then Steve, apparently losing the contentment brought on by his supper, began to complain of the weather. Failing to get any response from the other two workers he turned his attention to disparaging the Cave.

"The bloody Injin joint," he grunted. "A fine place for a man to work underground like a mole, with that cursed mummy swinging over us day and night. . . . What does he want to leave it there for? . . . I tell you the thing's bad luck . . . it's a hoodoo. I always said so from the beginning. I got a notion to chuck it tonight. What with that woman comin' in here every day to caper about under it like a heathen, and it grinnin' down on us all the time as if it knowed somethin' we don't, it's pretty near got my goat."

Gary had a moment's apprehension as he realized that the fellow, should he take a notion to cut down the mummy, would have to climb to the shelf where he lay hidden. He drew a breath of relief when Con answered:

"Everything gets your goat, Steve. Darned if I tie up with you for another season. It's you that'll bring us bad luck with your everlasting crabbing."

"Well, just as soon as I finish this pelt, I'm goin' to have a shot of *macoola,* Boss or no Boss," Steve went on in injured tones. "It's gettin' colder'n blitzen out, and a man needs something to warm his insides."

Gary, little by little, was easing over on his elbow, striving to turn his face so he could look down through the previously-made opening between the bales. He listened for the voice of Jim, hoping that under cover

of the young man's return from the float, he could make a complete shift of position.

He heard it at last, and a loud laugh, which mingled with the sound of a new voice. Then just as Gary completed his change, Jim's hearty announcement filled the Cave:

"What'd I tell you guys?" he roared, entirely forgetting his former prognostication. "Didn't I say the Boss'd get here in spite of the devil and the deep sea? Well, here he is!"

CHAPTER XXIV

AMID the scuffling and the hubbub of the greetings, Gary peered down through the opening between the bales of pelts. The harsh, unshaded glare of the gasoline lamp fell on the group of men below, touching high lights on their unshaved faces and their rough, picturesque garb. Backed by the black opening of the Cave stood Nicholas Nash, leisurely unbuttoning his heavy mackinaw. His cap was pushed far back on his light hair and his face was red as if he had been going against a cold wind. Behind him was Side-money.

The trader's eyes swept over the others as he dragged a canned-milk case from the pile of provisions and sat down upon it facing the men, his back to the great stone wedge.

"Now, men, what in blazes have you done with Tynan—that's what I want to know!" he asked, as he prepared to light a cigarette.

"Tynan?" "The cheechako!" simultaneously chorused the surprised voices of Con and Steve.

"Sure. You told me in Rezanoff this morning, Con, that you left him tied in the barn on Rocking Moon, but when we got there we couldn't find hide nor hair of the fellow."

Con's face was a picture of grotesque surprise. "Well, I'll be damned! We left him tied to the iron kettle in the barn. Why, Boss, he *must* be there!"

Nash's clean-cut brows came together in a frown. "He *isn't* there," he said shortly.

The other men looked into each other's faces uneasily, their work falling unheeded to the floor. Con asserted: "He was in the barn when we left the float, I'll swear to that. I tell you he couldn't get away, Nash."

"And I tell you he did get away," insisted the trader. "You fellows fell down on the job some place. Did he see any of you?"

"See us! No, Boss. I'll say he didn't!" Con ejaculated. "Jim sneaked out from behind the salmon vat and knocked him cuckoo from the back. He never knew what happened to him. Besides, we all had handkerchiefs over our faces."

The trader was silent for a moment, and obviously troubled. "He got away somehow. Still, if he didn't see any of you . . . " the sentence trailed off as he meditated. "But where the devil could he be? He wasn't on Rocking Moon, so far as we could see, and he couldn't get away from there unless you fellows took him. He had no boat, nothing except the bidarka. But no cheechako would tackle that this time of the year. Besides I saw it on the rack in the barn before I left."

The men began a confused interchange of surmises, which Nash cut short.

"That's not the only mystery either. Some one else has been poaching on Rocking Moon, besides ourselves. I found a set of traps and a couple of skins in

the tomb on Lampadny Point. I also found Tynan's watch there. From some data we ran across in his room it looks as if our clever young friend has either been doing a little pirating on his own hook—or else he's a government spy. . . . He's set down all kinds of information about the Island and fox-raising."

The listening Gary grinned to himself when he remembered the notes he had made on Rocking Moon against the time when he might be writing again.

"I'd give a thousand dollars right now if I knew where that cheechako is, damn him!" finished Nash, bringing his clenched fist down on his knee.

"He's hidin' out on Rocking Moon most likely, 'fraid to come out of his hole since the robbery," volunteered Side-money, uneasily. "But we should worry, Boss. The watch and the traps at the tomb helped cover up our work, didn't they?" he asked anxiously.

The trader did not answer. He dropped his half-smoked cigarette to the floor and put his foot on it. Steve slanted a sour look at the flattened weed, as if remembering that he and the others were barred from smoking in the Cave.

"There's something fishy about this tomb business, men," Nash went on, propping his elbows on his knees and sinking his head in his hands. "We've got to get at the bottom of it. I'll have no one else poaching on our territory."

Side-money had begun to walk up and down the Cave, perpetually turning his head to keep his eyes on his employer. He paused every few minutes to listen to the various suggestions made by the other men, suggestions which the trader discounted impatiently.

"Well, the traps and the watch *did* help us out,

didn't they, Boss?" he asked again, almost plaintively.

"Help us out—nothing!" snapped Nash, shooting him a glance. "They've got me all balled up until I don't know where we stand!"

Side-money hung his head and applying his little finger to his ear, oscillated it violently for a moment.

"Oh, heck!" he burst out finally. "If that's the way of it I might just as well own up. There wasn't no other poaching on Rocking Moon, Boss. It was me. I knew you wasn't going to let us fellows in on these RM pelts, and when I comes across that there swingin' log—well, it looked so handy, I just starts to set out a couple of traps on my own hook, thinking I might make a little side money. . . I only got two," he added, apologetically.

Nash's eyes smoldered, and his jaw set. Then anger and relief struggled for expression in his face. "You son-of-a-gun," he said, with pauses between the words. "You double-crossing, sneaking pin-head! I might have known it!"

"Hurrah! there goes one of the mysteries!" promptly declared the cheerful Jim. A sense of ease made itself felt among the men immediately, and as anger succumbed to relief at the solving of this troublesome problem, Nash leaned back against the stone wedge in an attitude of relaxation.

"Well," he agreed, "that leaves only Tynan to account for. But we'll work that out later," he decided suddenly. "I'm about all in, men, but I've got to leave for Kodiak in a couple of hours to report that Rocking Moon robbery. Nothing like keeping in with the law, you know." He yawned and stretched his arms. "By the way—how's the *macoola* coming on,

Steve. Is she ripe yet? I've been on the water wagon for three solid days, now."

Steve hopped up with alacrity, and as he began untying the old quilt that covered the top of the *macoola* barrel, his face assumed the loving look of a mother bending over her babe.

"She's *just* right, Boss. Clear as gin," he announced cheerfully, putting his head down and sniffing critically at the contents of the barrel.

"Good! Let's have a little drink all round then, Steve. But listen, you fellows—mind you get only one. Until this Rocking Moon job is done, I'm not going to run the risk of having you ball it up. I'm through with the first fellow that gets stewed—remember that." He tilted his head back, stretched his arms again and yawned. "God, this is the only place on the coast that I really feel safe any more. I'm glad you've made the last haul, men. I'm getting fed up on this Jekyll and Hyde business. Three or four weeks now, and we'll be heading along the Aleutians to Petropavlosk, and then down the Kurile Islands toward Kobe. We'll get one hundred and seventy-five dollars for every pelt we have here." He took the tin dipper full of *macoola* from Steve, and held it high. "To a quick passage and a smooth sea!"

The dipper went from hand to hand, shedding its raw odor on the humid air of the Cave. As the men returned to the flensing of the skins, Nash leaned forward, his arms resting on his knees, his hands clasped between them.

"Now we'll get down to business, fellows. How many Rocking Moon skins have we altogether?"

"About a hundred and twenty," answered Con

"And they're the finest of the lot, too. I wish we could turn 'em into the pool, Boss!"

Nash's eyes flashed warningly. "Nothing doing! You keep to your bargain or you don't get that thousand dollars I promised you men for this raid. Those skins are mine. I wouldn't have allowed you to touch that Island anyway. You know that. So you're not losing anything. In fact you're a thousand to the good. You fellows never will get it into your heads that we can't afford to poach on the Aleutian Islands if we want to keep our cache here a secret," he finished impatiently.

"Poach on the Aleutians! Huh! What do you call Rocking Moon?" snorted Con.

"Well, I'm not stealing those skins, men." Nash lifted the dipper from the floor and took another drink.

"Not stealin' 'em?" exclaimed Con, eyeing the tin greedily. "Say, I'd like to know what you call it!"

"I borrowed 'em, see!" asserted Nash, waving the empty dipper with a gravity slightly tinged by the tin's former contents. "Merely borrowed 'em." He dismissed the subject with another wave. "Now see here, boys, listen to me while I tell you how to finish your end of the bargain." He leaned forward while his somnolent eyes traveled from face to face. "I want no blundering about it either: In the first place how many times have you repainted the working launch?"

"Let's see—she's changed her color four times. We kept her white for the Lone Goose and Naked Island raids. She's green now."

"Then paint her red and black tomorrow, and take

the mast out of her. Put plenty of dryer in the paint. Five days from now—I'll give you more detail about this later—you're to load all these Rocking Moon pelts aboard her, and on the night tide run her into Bixby's Cove where the old fish-trap is. Ram her on the reef and put a hole in her. Beach her there inside the trap at full tide, and have plenty of gasoline in the tank. Then beat it for the Oo-koon launch, which you will have waiting for you outside the Cove, and be careful you leave no tell-tale paraphernalia aboard the wrecked launch."

"Wreck her with the Rocking Moon skins aboard —" began Steve in astonishment.

"You heard me!" Nash's eyes rested upon him a moment. "Stow the skins in the cabin where they won't get wet when she settles on the beach. And ——"

"Of all the gosh-awful foolstunts—" Steve started again, grumblingly.

"Never mind about that! Now that the season's work is over, the only safe thing to do is make away with that working launch before some gumshoe Government man starts looking it over. Anyway—I'll happen along at Bixby's Cove right on your heels when the tide is out. Perhaps I'll have the Marshal with me from Kodiak—and again—" he hesitated. "Again, I might have a lady with me. Can't tell about that just yet. But at any rate, after I discover the wrecked launch, and find the skins—" he winked slyly at the listening men—"I'll take 'em aboard the *Seal Pup,* and I'll see to it that the gasoline is set to running and drop a lighted match before we leave." Nash stopped to tip the dipper against his mouth

once more, while Steve's avid eyes followed every swallow.

"Ah-ha!" cried Jim, whose sense of romance had been sharpened by his one drink of *macoola*. "Methinks I see how the land lays now!" He struck an attitude. "Noble hero restores lovely lady's stolen property, and lovely lady in gratitude falls into hero's arms burbling 'I will!' . . . Well, all's fair in love and war, I suppose, only it's a darned lot of trouble and risky as the devil."

"Trouble?" burst out Steve, his eyes still on the dipper. "What about this other woman on the Island —this hell-cat——"

He stopped. Everyone was looking at the trader and there was a distinct tension in the atmosphere. The glaring light of the gasoline lamp fell full on Nash's face. A muscle at the flange of his nose was twitching and his eyes were narrowed and dangerous.

"Look here, men," he said in an ominously slow voice. "You keep your dirty tongues out of my private affairs. That girl on Rocking Moon is not to be talked over by your kind. Get that?"

The uncomfortable silence which followed was broken only by the scrape of flensing-knives and the wheezing of the lamp. The men, outside of Nash, were bound together by the ties of hazard and their unlawful enterprises. Their lusts and adventures and crimes were open books to each other, but now they recognized in Nicholas Nash some indefinable quality that set him apart from them.

The trader averted his eyes, apparently well satisfied with the effect of his last words, and took another drink from the dipper. With an effort to relieve the

charged atmosphere, he leaned forward with his elbows again on his knees and asked:

"What's the matter with your face, Steve?"

Steve touched a long red scar on his cheek. The subject seemed not a happy one with him. Jim, the loquacious, explained, with a grin:

"Well, you see, it was this way, Boss: Steve sees the woman comin' in here with her wooden mask on —she's been cryin' and cryin' and carryin' on lately something fierce—and he think's he'll—well, he'll be nice to her; comfort her, you understand. But at the first move he makes, she ups and claws him like a wild-cat."

Nash's heavy-lidded eyes rested on the perturbed Steve. The woman of Oo-koon was, apparently, an open subject for discussion; for to the men's obvious relief a slow smile struggled on the trader's lips.

"So that's the way of it," he said, slowly closing one eye and nodding with an air of wisdom born of his potations. "You'll learn, after a while, to keep your hands off anything with my brand on it, Steve. . . . Crying and carrying on is she? . . . Say, Jim—go tell her to come down here. Go tell her *I* say for her to come down," he added as Jim, buttoning his mackinaw, obediently stood up.

"Now then—" Nash turned importantly to the others with an exaggerated flourish of his arm. The effect of the *macoola* was a growing, boastful garrulity. "Now then, fellows, I'll give you a little lesson in woman-taming. By God! my Russian ancestors had the right hunch about them. Know what those old birds said? 'A woman's hair is long and her understanding short!' That's what they said, an' I'll tell

the world they were right. . . . An' another wise crack they made—'The wits of a woman are like the wildness of beasts'—eh, Steve? Get that one? 'the wildness of beasts!' You ought to know!" He burst into a roar that was echoed by the others. Jim disappeared behind the stone wedge.

"We'll let her see us count the skins tonight, boys," Nash went on benevolently, as he indicated the shelf where Gary lay hidden. "It'll cheer her up when we tell her how much money they're worth. Money talks with women!" He nodded wisely.

"You said a mouthful," corroborated Con.

"But not a word about the Rocking Moon skins, and remember—she thinks I'm keeping this place as a cache for the furs I buy at the trading-post. Hop up there, Steve, and begin throwin' down the bales."

Steve rose, stretched his arms, and with a wary eye on the trader, reached, unrebuked, for the dipper. He took a long drink, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand with a satisfied "Ah-a-a!", and passed the tin on to Con. Then, to Gary's alarm, he began to climb up over the provisions toward the shelf where the cheechako lay hidden.

As the man was balancing himself unsteadily on the first tier of boxes, Gary's desperate scheme of attack was rendered unnecessary by the entrance of Jim and the woman. Every eye was turned on her as she came in slowly, a tall figure whose face was concealed by a heavy enveloping shawl held beneath her chin. She seemed neither shrinking nor bold, but stolidly indifferent.

Nash rose from his box with a gallantry that was an admirable blend of the alcoholic and the sardonic.

He swept off his cap and bowed low in the manner of his Russian forebears.

"Welcome, my dear, to our cave-warming!" The men chuckled. "The boys tell me you have been l-lonely without me, and have consoled yourself with his royal nibs up here—" he tilted his head to indicate the swinging mummy, then turned to face the others. "A little cheer, boys. Come, pass the flowing bowl in honor of the lady's visit. One more drink can't hurt men like us on a night like this."

Steve nearly fell off his perch in his haste to get down.

Shedding the smell of raw spirits, the *macoola* made the round again, each man acknowledging the silent woman with clumsy, embarrassed lifts of the dipper. Nash received it empty and reached down into the barrel. A moment later he stood before the woman, his cap forming a close halo about his light hair, his mackinaw hanging open, and his eyes glowing in his flushed face.

There was an expansive recklessness now in his manner as he held out the dripping tin.

"*'Today,'*" he quoted gaily, "*'Today it is our—our pleasure to be drunk; And this, our queen, shall be as drunk as we!'*"

He swayed toward the woman, who made no move to indicate that she had heard him, or was even aware of the presence of any of the others.

"Drink, pretty creature, drink!" Nash's effort to keep up the convivial spirit of the occasion fell flat as he held out the cup again.

The woman was as unresponsive as the stone wedge.

"Come, come! Wake up!" he went on impatiently,

aware of his interested audience. "Drink!" He held the edge of the dipper within an inch of the bowed head, then thrust the rim of it viciously against the woman's mouth. But she still remained as motionless as a statue. In the uncomfortable silence the roar of the sea seeped into the cavern to mingle with the sizzling of the gasoline lamp.

Before this stolid, Indian indifference the grinning faces of the men grew sober. They began to shift their feet uneasily and look away in embarrassed efforts to cover their knowledge of the Boss's failure to make good his boast about women.

The smoldering fire in Nash's eyes flared into sudden flame as his mood changed. "Oh, you won't—eh?" His voice was ominous as he shot out his chin and tossed the *macoola* into the barrel, dipper and all. "Clear out of here, men," he snapped. "I'll call you when I want you again."

With clumsy alacrity the others filed out. Only Jim hesitated a moment, looking from the tensed face of Nash to the bowed head of the woman. Then, as if this were none of his affair, he shrugged his shoulders and followed his companions.

The trader covered the short distance between him and the apathetic figure with one stride. "Trying to be stubborn, eh?" he rasped, with set jaw. "Trying to make a fool of me in front of the gang, huh?" In drunken fury he jerked at the shawl.

The obscuring wrap fell away from the woman's face. Gary looked down at her a moment and nearly betrayed his presence by a gasp of astonishment.

It was Zoya.

CHAPTER XXV

IT was Zoya, but not the Zoya of a few months ago. Under the triangle of her heavy, dark hair the creole's face was thin and pallid.

"What the devil's the matter with you, anyhow?" Nash demanded, scowling. "Are you dumb?" Against the wall of the girl's silence the surge of his anger broke with no effect, maddening him with a sense of helplessness. "Can you blame me for getting tired of you—wanting to get rid of you? *I* want a woman who's a companion, a pal, a good fellow! One that'll drink with me when I feel like it. One that has a little ginger in her—a little spirit—" the sentence ended in a hiccough.

Zoya slowly raised her head and her dark eyes rested on the trader's flushed face with the impersonal regard of one who follows her own thoughts.

"An' what are *you,* huh? . . . A Dumb Dora, that's what you are, that's either praying to a Tin Peter, or shimmying a dance beneath a confounded mummy. Fine combination of cheer that is. God!" He jerked one hand from his pocket with an impatient gesture. "It's enough to drive a man crazy!"

"Nicolai," Zoya's voice was startling in its quietness as she placed her fingers on his arm. "Nicolai, take me home."

Without moving from the spot he yanked himself

free of her touch. "Take you *home!*" he echoed scornfully. "Huh! a fine welcome you'd get if you went home . . . Now, have a little sense, Zoya."

"I'm going home——"

"Look here! For God's sake, don't start that again!" Nash cut in brutally. "You know you can't go back to Rocking Moon, now. You wait here a few days longer until I get back from Kodiak, and I'll do what I promised when we got into this mess. I'll be square with you, Zoya, and send you out to the States, and keep you there, by George, like a lady! Like a white woman!"

He ignored the slow, negative shake of the girl's head. "I'll put you aboard the launch with Con and he'll take you to Seward. No one knows you there, and you can get a steamer South. Think of it, Zoya," he tried to speak persuasively, as he took her lifeless hand. "Think of it, going to the States with all the money you want and living down there in some little Southern town where the sun shines all the time, and never having to turn your hand to a bit of work! I'll tell you a lot of white women would consider themselves mighty lucky to have your chances: fine clothes, moving pictures every night, fine smooth pavements to walk on, and a lot of other things you've never even seen yet, Zoya."

The girl neither moved nor spoke.

"And sometimes—maybe once a year," he hesitated as if he feared to commit himself to too much, "I'll come down to see you."

"I'm going home——"

Nash flung her hand from him and took a swift, impatient turn up and down the cavern, stopping himself

abruptly before her again. "I tell you, you *can't* go home." He spoke with forced calmness, his chin set. "Remember, Zoya, you're not like any other half-breed. You've been raised in the house of a priest. You've been raised almost as a companion to a priest's daughter. Think of it, yourself,—do you want to bring disgrace on those people you love? Do you want to make a scandal that'll be talked all up and down the coast of Alaska? Good God!" His anger burst its bounds. "We went over all that when you consented to leave Rocking Moon. I tell you, Zoya, you *can't* go back there in your condition—unless you're married."

The creole raised her head and the two looked at each other.

"I can go back if you will marry me, Nicolai——"

"*Marry* you! Marry a half-breed! You're crazy, Zoya. Men in my position don't marry half-breeds. You ought to know that as well as I do. Get it out of your head."

"But you said——"

"Said *nothing!* . . . Look here, Zoya. *All* the blame for this mess isn't mine. You were as willing as I to take chances, now weren't you?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, I know, Nicolai. But it does not matter, now. I shall burn in hell and pay for it. But first—I am going home," she reiterated dully. "I have prayed to God. I have danced for the spirits of Oo-koon many days. They tell me I am going home. . . . Your United States where it is always sunshine—your fine clothes—for those things I do not care any more. I think only that our baby shall be born in my own country, among my own people. I am going home to Sasha. She——"

"You shall do nothing of the kind, you—you *squaw!*" the trader interrupted furiously. "Rather than have you go to her I'd—I'd see you and your damned brat——"

Zoya leaped like a wounded animal. "You shall not call our baby a brat!" she cried, landing a stinging blow on Nash's face. He started back as she confronted him, dark eyes flashing, lip curled back from her teeth, breast heaving, a creature transformed by the fierce mother love that is characteristic of Aleut women. For a moment they gazed silently into each other's eyes with the cold hatred possible only to those who have once loved. Then Zoya caught up her shawl and flung it about her with a gesture that had in it both dignity and nobility. "I'm going home," she repeated, a ring of determination in her voice. "No place else shall our baby be born."

She turned and moved rapidly through the opening of the Cave.

The trader sprang after her and Gary listened to the diminishing sound of their voices as the two went along the narrow passage toward the outer cavern.

His brain was busy with the facts he had overheard during the long, tedious inaction of the day. The raid on Rocking Moon, the sordid puzzle of poor Zoya's disappearance, his own concealment behind the bales of skins—the whole thing seemed of a piece with some wild tale of adventure. He looked down on the disorder of half-scraped pelts lying under the glare of the gasoline lamp. The men would soon be back to finish their work and he, with no weapon other than the Colonel's Toad-stabber, must rely on his wits to get the best of the six men on Oo-koon. Six against one!

The melodramatic situation made him smile to himself as he was reminded of those adventure stories he once had written—when he himself had had but few adventures. His plot sense had failed him two years ago, but now he found he was going about the work of extricating himself from his plight quite as though he were planning for one of his own heroes.

He listened to make sure that no one was entering the outer cave, then stood up to stretch his stiffened limbs. He noted that the provisions piled on one side of the Cave near the opening, were half-covered with a tarpaulin. The gasoline lamp, with its two glowing mantles, stood on a stack of cased goods. A moment later he was down on the floor examining the plug before the stone wedge, and the groove, smooth and slippery with oil, in which the thing slid to bury its thinner edge in the opposite wall. He could not but admire the ingenuity of those long-dead Aleuts who had devised the arrangement.

After a few hasty exercises to limber his stiff limbs, he settled himself in a depression between some sacks of flour and drew the tarpaulin over him. He was not more than two feet from the unshaded lamp.

Jim and Con came in and each took a long drink of *macoola.* They were smacking their lips when Steve, Side-money and Mack joined them, and the dipper made another round. Gary learned from their conversation that Nash had gone to Zoya's barabara.

"It's goin' to be women that will swamp this outfit yet, you mark my words," prophesied the gloomy Steve. "Now why he's goin' to stage that stunt with the Rocking Moon skins is more'n *I* can see!"

"You big cheese!" retorted Jim scornfully. "C-can't

you see the Boss wan's get solid with the red-headed girl? Ain't you learned nothin' from the movies?"

"She ain't wantin' to marry him none in the first place," volunteered Side-money, with a drunken nod. "He pulls this robbery stunt thinkin' when she's broke an' in debt an' all she'll have to take him. I don't know whether she did or not—they was hashin' somethin' out in the cabin of the *Pup* this afternoon before we left Rocking Moon. But if he finds them skins for her it's a cinch she'll have him. She's all broke up about her foxes—but between me'n you—" Side-money winked with a show of vast intelligence—"I think she's more bowled over because she thinks the cheechako done it. . . . She was sweet on him, if you ask me. . . . Where do you s'pose that guy went, huh?"

"So long's he keeps shy of Oo-koon, we don't care where he went," declared Con, with a long gurgle. "Pash the—the *macoola,* Jim. One more round and we'll start shortin' skins. Wind's going down a bit and the Boss'll be on his way in an hour or so—if he ever gets through with his woman." Con chuckled. "Gosh a'mighty, but he was sure mad!"

"Letsh cut out the—the hootch, boysh," objected Jim, thickly. He indicated with a tilt of his head the figure of Mack sitting back against the wall, staring intently at his own feet out in front of him. He was beating time with one hand and trying to sing, but failing. "Letsh get this place c-cleaned up and go to bed. I'm sleepy. We've had enough."

"Enough, nothing!" Con hiccoughed with a short, sharp yelp, which struck the gloomy Steve as funny, for his lower jaw fell open to loose a cackle of mirth.

"Wha's the matter? Ain't I right?" Con glared at

him suspiciously. "Quit your snortin' and put a fair wind behind that hootch cup."

Through a peep-hole Gary watched and blessed the inebriated inaccuracy with which Steve passed the dipper to Con.

"To . . . Suc-chess!" that individual said thickly.

When the dipper reached Jim, he nodded with an air of bemused omniscience into the portion left for him. "I—I—shay, boysh——"

The sentence ended in an oath and darkness, for Gary at that moment brought his cap swiftly down over the fragile mantles of the gasoline lamp. While the men in cursing confusion, were trying to get to their feet he made for the stone pin that held back the wedge. Fumbling for it in the dark, he was aware of the incoherent and befuddled amazement of the men, who were just beginning to realize that the extinction of the light was due to something besides accident. Feet thumped toward the narrow opening where Gary was desperately trying to find the plug. One hand touched it at last. He marked it by placing a foot against it and rose quickly. He became conscious of *macoola*-tainted breath and put out his left hand, bringing up against a man's body. With this to guide him he delivered a smashing blow with his right, and as the man went reeling back against his cursing companions, Gary pulled the stone pin.

As the blackness was filled with the noise of the sliding wedge, Gary on the outside, slumped against the rocky wall, his knees suddenly weak, but elation welling in his heart. Thanks to the *macoola* he was now even for the incredibly easy knock-out in the barn at Rocking Moon. The five men would stay where

he had imprisoned them until some one let them out —but he had still to deal with Nicholas Nash.

Outside the outer cave he stamped his feet and swung his arms and legs in a very ecstasy of motion. After the humid, liquor-scented atmosphere of the Cavern in which he had lain so many hours, the effect of the crisp, fresh air was like champagne. Overhead the sky was star-studded and in the north the Aurora trembled palely. Small, noisy waves churned a foam-line along the beach in front of him, and the choppy Cove gave evidence of the storm which the men had discussed during the afternoon. Bobbing and bumping at the float were three launches—the *Seal Pup,* the green working launch of the pirates, and the launch of the Oo-koon ranch, which Gary had seen before at Rezanoff. An orange square of light marked the window of Zoya's barabara. Gary's problem was to get away from the island without being seen, and to leave those behind with no means of leaving it, for he intended to be back within nine hours with the marshal who would take charge of the situation on Oo-koon. He could tow two of the launches behind the *Pup* as he went, but could he get aboard the craft unobserved? In order to reach it he was forced to pass in front of Zoya's barabara, from which Nash might come forth at any moment. If only there were some way of locking the trader in the hut!

Gary slipped from boulder to boulder and turned into the snowy path leading up to the barabara. He saw, with satisfaction, that it had a fastening common to the doors of Northern shacks—the door opened outward and on each side, embedded in the jamb, was a steel upright into which a heavy board might be slipped, thus

barring the width of the doorway. The board, standing against the front of the barabara, was not a barrier of much strength, but he hoped it would delay Nash's appearance, should he try to come out within the next fifteen minutes. As Gary advanced he heard the sound of voices within the dwelling. He reached for the barrier just as Nash's tones rose angrily. A second later, above the breaking of the sea, came a scream of terror.

Gary sprang forward with a second scream ringing in his ears, threw open the door, and plunged into the hut. For an instant a flood of cold air obscured the scene with vapor. Then he saw Nash, inflamed with rage and drink, pressing Zoya against the wall with one hand, while the other was fastened about her slim throat in a grip that whitened the knuckles.

With a leap Gary was upon the trader, jerking him from his victim. Nash turned quick as a cat and toe to toe the two men swayed a moment, broke, fell back and bounding to attack again, started raining quick, vicious blows on each other. Zoya, terrified, scrambled to the bunk and stood looking on the battle below her.

Despite their hampering mackinaws the men fought fiercely, exultantly, as men fight who have longed for months to get at one another, and the creole girl watched spellbound while each man held his own against the other for a quarter of an hour. Then the *macoola* brought its inevitable result. Nash's blows began to go wild. Little by little he weakened under the swift pummeling of the cheechako. A grapple, a sudden intertwining of legs, and both went crashing to the floor, kicking, clutching like two dogs in a death

grip. They rolled over and over with snarls and curses breaking through their panting. The trader succeeded in getting the cheechako under him, tried desperately to get at his throat, and failing, managed to insert his thumb inside Gary's cheek. With all his might he strove to rip the cheechako's mouth.

The attempt fired Gary with fury. He flung an arm over the straining figure above him and with a mighty heaving, lunged toward the bunk. Nash's head struck the corner of it. He went suddenly limp, half stunned from the impact, and in a trice Gary was on him tying his wrists together with a handkerchief. He was making the last knot when he became aware that Zoya was coming for him with an upraised stick of wood in her hands.

"Let him go!" she screamed, her face distorted, savage, like that of a she-bear defending her cub. "Let him go or I'll kill you!" The stick began its swift descent and instinctively Gary flung up an arm to protect his head.

"Zoya!" a new voice called, and through the doorway leaped a small, white-clad figure.

Zoya's descending arm was thrust upward, the wood went crashing through the window, and Gary found himself gazing incredulously at the creole girl pinioned in the arms of Sasha Larianoff.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Sasha had waved good-bye to Nicholas Nash as he started for Kodiak, by the way of Oo-koon, she stood for some minutes in the spindrift on the rocking float, watching the *Seal Pup* speed out across the wind-torn bay. The gusts swayed her body and flattened her eyelids, yet a strange inertia held her there. Mentally and physically she was weary, so weary she wondered how she had found strength to resist Nick a little while ago in the cabin of the *Seal Pup* when he had caught her in his arms and pleaded so eloquently that she marry him. Then—freed from the magnetic spell of his presence she began wondering how she had, even for a moment, allowed herself to be swayed by him.

She had not promised to marry him, but Nick had gone off happy in the assurance that she would give him a definite answer when he returned from Kodiak. As if she were thinking of some other girl, the question formed in her mind: was she, after all, going to marry Nicolai? . . . She shook her head, she could make no decision yet, she was too heartsick over her loss, too tired. . . . She glanced once more across the rough bay darkening under the swift approach of night, and turned to allow the wind to blow her along the trail to the ranch-house.

Half an hour later, after a bath and a change of clothes, she came out into the living-room intending to discuss with the Colonel and Feodor, plans for their future. A wild notion had come to her of going to the States to get work, and thus pay off some of her debts. But the very thought of leaving her Rocking Moon home brought such an anguish of homesickness that she stood in the doorway gazing with new appreciation at the homely comfort of the living-room: the cushioned couch before the cheery hearth-fire, the music, the books, the wide easy chairs, the glint of copper and the green of hanging plants.

Unaware of her presence, the Colonel sat musing in his chair. Old Seenia was dreaming in hers. A faint supper-savor from the kitchen told her that Feodor was out there making a stew. The softened strumming of his old guitar sifted through the house. Gay, irresponsible Feodor, who always whiled away with music those minutes when he waited for anything to cook. Tears welled up in Sasha's eyes and tightened her throat. Her home! Her people! Suddenly she knew how dear they were to her. She couldn't give them up now. She couldn't leave all this for the cold, inhospitable States, where people lived in little apartments, one over another, like rabbits in a hutch.

The Colonel looked up and caught sight of her tear-dimmed eyes. "Come here, my dear," he began sympathetically. "Come and sit by me for a while."

At the sound of his voice Seenia raised her white head with the air of one who has been waiting. She stretched high her shaking hand in a gesture that had in it the authoritative dignity of the savage.

"Are we forgetting?" she asked in her quiet, ac-

cented voice. "Are we forgetting we have cause for thanks? Your father—he is saved. God listens. God hears. But no light burns in the *lampada!*" Her brown finger pointed to the corner where the *lampada* hung before the gold-and-silver icon of the Saviour.

Sasha understood. Always in good fortune, or on church feast days, a light was set burning before the sacred picture. For years it had been Seenia's pleasure to attend to it—Seenia, who had a child's delight in all forms and ceremonies. But age had forced her to relinquish this pleasure to Zoya. Sasha reproached herself with having forgotten, for a time, her father's escape from danger. Seenia had not forgotten. She never forgot the man she had nursed in his babyhood.

"Of course, Seenia. I will set the light burning right away," the girl hastened to say. "Ah, Feodor—" the creole had come in, his sleeves rolled up, an apron tied about his waist. "Do draw a chair up before the icon, please. We'll make a light for Dad, tonight."

When Feodor had complied, Sasha, taking a match from the Colonel, crossed over to the chair and prepared to mount it.

"Sasha!" The old Aleut had risen and was coming slowly toward her with upraised, arresting hand. "To-night—Seenia makes the light." She reached for the match, a faint smile playing about her mouth. "For my little Anton. It is the last time."

"Let her do it, Sasha," encouraged Feodor. "Here —I can help her up with my good arm."

A moment later the old woman, swaying slightly, stood on the chair, Sasha holding her on one side and Feodor on the other. She held the match in her fingers while she looked into the pictured face of the

Saviour and with her other hand made the sign of the cross. Her eye must have noted a shift in the position of the icon, for instead of striking a light she leaned forward and took hold of it, striving to set it straight. A moment of dizziness sent her body swaying toward the picture, one side of which was forced back as the other came forward. Simultaneously came a cry—such a cry of joy and wonder as Sasha had never heard before. The trembling old woman was drawing from behind the icon a square, flat box with sand clinging to its sides. Sasha's heart gave a wild leap!

"Seenia—Seenia——"

The Aleut stood erect clasping the box against her breast, her deep-set eyes glowing with the light of youth. Triumph, exultation were in her voice as she spoke. "God has heard! It is the Mask of Jade!"

Sasha, in her joy, never knew what she did in that instant, but she came to herself carrying Seenia to her chair as if she had been a baby. The old woman shook with a palsy of eagerness as she settled the box on her lap, and, drawing a key from the string about her neck, unlocked it. The others, pressing close, watched her slowly lift the lid. One glance convinced them that Seenia had indeed stumbled on the long lost treasure.

There was no time now to speculate as to how it had come there behind the icon, when it had disappeared long before the family moved to Rocking Moon. Sasha, with hope darting through her, sprang up and ran to the calendar. Her mind was working like lightning. She must have money, and she would have it—if she could reach Seward in time to collect the $8,000 left there in the bank for the Mask of Jade. Today was the first of December. She had three days left in

which to claim the deposit. Three days! Seventy-two hours! And three hundred miles of wintry sea lay between Rocking Moon and Seward, with no way to get there except on the little *Simmie and Ann* that made barely five miles an hour. And a head wind was blowing—a wind that was a gale now. That meant only four miles an hour—if she dared venture out on the sea tonight. . . . Dare—she *must* dare. Her home, her happiness, and the happiness of her people depended on it. . . . But at four miles an hour the *Simmie and Ann* could never make it. Her heart sank.

She walked listlessly to the window and looked down at the float where her little launch lay rocking in the gloom. If only Nicolai had been delayed another hour, he could have taken her to Seward. The *Seal Pup* could get her there on time. She beat one small fist into her other palm. There must be some way in which she could reach Seward in time——

It flashed upon her. Nick was going first to Oo-koon. He would be there several hours. If only she could overtake him before he started on to Kodiak. Quickly she computed—thirty miles to Oo-koon, a head wind and Nick had been gone over an hour. If he stayed four hours at his fox ranch, perhaps she could make it! She would make it. But there was the Colonel——

She knew the old man would never allow her to venture out on a night like this, he who was worrying now about Nicolai in the staunch *Seal Pup*. She looked up at the sky, alive with cold, bright stars. The wind whined like a siren about the eaves of the house, and the forest sang a wild boreal chant above the roar of the breakers on the outer beach. A clear, cold blow it

was; dangerous weather for small boats along the Aleutians. A drop in the temperature and—she shivered. She remembered it was in such clear, bitter weather last winter that the little steamer *Akutan* had left Kodiak for Seward and become iced over from the flying, freezing spray—iced down in the bow. It foundered with all on board. . . . But she must take a chance. She had only seventy-two hours left and every hour was precious! She must go, for only she could collect the money for the Mask of Jade in the absence of her father.

Desperately she turned from the window and her eyes met those of Feodor—Feodor the fearless, the irresponsible, the reckless. Feodor always ready for any mad adventure. For the first time she thanked heaven that he was that way, and that he would do anything in the world for her. His arm was practically well. He knew the *Simmie and Ann's* engine. He could make it go as long as the little craft floated.

Fifteen minutes later she was standing in the starlit dusk on the rocking float, dressed in her warmest white wool. While the wind whipped her scarf about her she turned back for a farewell look at the lighted windows of the old, wide ranch-house, in which unsuspecting Colonel Jeff sat whittling out a wooden leg for Alexander. Dear Colonel Jeff! She wondered how soon he would miss her and Feodor, and find the note she had left for him under his tobacco jar—a note telling him they had gone to Oo-koon to overtake Nicolai.

She sprang aboard the *Simmie and Ann* now vibrating to the throb of the engine, and putting the brass-bound box in the cabin bunk, stepped to her place at the

wheel, while Feodor cast off. Her conscience gave a twinge as she pictured the Colonel's terrible anxiety when he found she was gone, but the instant the *Simmie and Ann* began to move away from the float, everything else vanished from her mind except the business of handling the launch.

Under the icy stars the gale furrowed the sheltered bay into flying scud. The girl brought the launch up into the teeth of the wind and sent it ahead. It jerked up and down and staggered under the impact of short, hammering waves that flung themselves under the bow. It trembled from stem to stern like a frightened thing forced into danger, and Sasha, in the dark wheelhouse, felt her heart beat with a growing fear, as she gripped the spokes of the wheel.

She lowered the brine-splashed window that obscured her view and was met by a rush of wind that stung her face and left it dripping.

"My oilskins, Feodor!" She tried to keep the tremor from her voice as she called above the stridor to the creole, who had just come up from the engine.

He handed her the garments. While she got into the yellow slicker and tied the sou'wester under her chin, he steadied the wheel, his black hair tossing wildly about his eyes. Sasha laid hold of the steering-gear just as the *Simmie and Ann* lunged past the grey-white dunes of Lampadny Point lying low in the blowing foam.

Once out from under the lee of the Point the sound of deep-toned breakers rolled like a cannonade above the chugging of the engine and the *Simmie and Ann* gave a leap that sent Sasha reeling against Feodor.

"Solnishko . . ." Steadying himself on wide-

spread feet he put out his hands to hold her. His voice was thin and queer. "We'd better turn back. . . . We never can—*God!*"

Off the beam a gigantic black billow suddenly reared up licking the stars. Instinctively Sasha threw the wheel over and the launch met it quarter on and climbed gallantly to the crest.

"God!" she echoed, as it raced beneath them, dropping them down into the seething, foam-streaked hollow. Another mountain of water charged them—then another. Stools crashed and skidded in the wheel-house. Dishes clattered from their racks in the cabin. Screaming of wind, roaring of waters, straining of timbers and lashing of rope ends made pandemonium about the panic-stricken Sasha bracing herself at the wheel. Her conscious mind was blank. But something underneath was directing her hands—something that came from the subconscious that had stored all her former experiences on the sea. This instinct acted for her in the moment of chaos, and she came to herself safely past the third great wave, into water that was noticeably calmer.

Wiping the brine from her smarting eyes she began tensely to guide her craft over the rearing, foam-sheeted billows. The faint glow of the binnacle-light shone on her girlish face, pale under the dripping sou'-wester. Her chin was set, and her eyes narrowed with the expression that characterized the painted face of Anton, the Fighting Priest, in his frame above the fireplace at Rocking Moon.

Feodor picked himself up from the heaving floor of the wheel-house.

"We're going on, Feodor." The words were jerked

out between turns of the creaking wheel. "Got to—broach to if I tried—turn back. Stand by your engine. We'll make it."

The creole looked at her a moment. Then his slim, womanish hand came down on her shoulder encouragingly. "Yes, by God, we *will* make it, Sasha!" he burst out with sudden confidence, and turned to dart below to his engine.

Alone in the dark wheel-house Sasha trembled with fear so great that it had become a sort of desperate courage. The thumping of her heart shook her. She could scarcely keep her feet on the lurching floor, and her limbs were leaden with terror. But she knew that on the skill and quickness of her hand and brain depended her life and Feodor's, and her eyes darted surely between the swinging black and white of the compass and the avalanching seas that raced toward her. Over the bow spray drove in through the open window stinging her eyes and drenching her oilskins. Her hands ached and grew numb on the spokes of the wheel as she sent the pathetically small *Simmie and Ann* to battle against the vast, threatening ocean. Every time the prow rose from the trough of a wave, shedding cataracts of water in its struggle to the top, she felt a surge of gratitude. "God . . . God . . ." She found that she had unconsciously been whispering the word a long time. She knew now why men of the sea felt the need of strong words, powerful words.

Time wore on and she began to feel a lessening of her fear, a sort of uneasy confidence in herself. She kept telling herself that the sea had never harmed a Larianoff. The sea would never harm a Larianoff. Then suddenly the steady pulsing of the engine slack-

ened . . . stopped. While the desperate Sasha futilely spun the wheel, the boat began to swing broadside to a charging, white-crested roller.

For a terrible instant she saw the helpless *Simmie and Ann* broaching to, capsizing. Then once more the chugging vibrated throughout the little craft and it plunged on.

"Oh, good little *Simmie and Ann!*" Sasha gasped, tears in her voice. "My wonderful, brave little boat!" Her hand patted the wheel as if she were caressing a living thing. But she listened with fearful, straining intensity to every throb of the engine. Could Feodor keep it going?

Feodor proved equal to the emergency and after the space of an hour the steady reassuring beat brought relaxation. As the driver instinctively guides his car safely through the surging tide of city traffic, so Sasha —born to the sea—intuitively handled the *Simmie and Ann* on the roughest water she had ever known. She grew calmer, surer of herself and of her craft. She even began to take a pride in the gallant staunchness of her little boat, and a sort of fearful joy in sending it at an angle to clear the incredible billows crashing in from the sea.

After a long time Feodor came into the wheel-house with a steaming cup of coffee he had somehow managed to make for her on the galley stove. While he relieved her at the wheel, she drank it gratefully, and stamped her numbed feet and beat her arms about her body to get up her circulation again.

They had been battling five hours against the wind and sea when the slopes of Oo-koon loomed dark against the sky each time the launch rose to the crest

of a wave. Familiar though she was with charts of these waters Sasha had never been to the Island, and Feodor had gone there only once with Nick who was making a flying trip to drop off some supplies.

Another hour brought them near enough to feel a lessening of the wind. The water calmed perceptibly, despite the terrifying thunder of sea-assaulted caves and the boom of spouting breakers leaping white in the gloom.

Feodor put the engine at half speed, and opened another window in the wheel-house. He stood with his head out looking up through the spindrift for a remembered mountain contour which would guide them more surely to the entrance of the Cove. The *Simmie and Ann* tossed and rolled. Shore and water rocked crazily about them, and Sasha kept a nervous watch to starboard where huge combers crashed above slightly submerged rocks. Suddenly Feodor, with a cry, leaped back and jammed the wheel over. The launch veered and swept on, missing by a few feet a black, cataract-shedding rock.

"Head her off! Head her off, Sasha!" he shouted above the roar. "We're too close in!"

There came a tense half hour of working the *Simmie and Ann* cautiously out through the reef-sown waters. Then, when the weary Sasha had almost given up hope of finding the entrance to the Cove, Feodor pointed to a low, dim headland misted with the spume of breakers.

"Hurrah! It's there, Sasha! Just round that point!"

Into the chop of the Cove the little launch chugged. The comparative quiet, after the battering of the open sea, made Sasha feel as if the whole world had sud-

denly dropped away beneath her. Her knees and hands fell to shaking violently, and she was powerless to control the chattering of her teeth. She had been at the wheel seven hours.

When she brought the *Simmie and Ann* alongside the float, three launches lay bobbing in the starlight. One was the *Seal Pup*.

All was dark aboard the moored boats, but a light glowed in the window of a snow-covered barabara above the beach line. Sasha slipped off the slicker and sou'wester, and after a word to Feodor, began making her way shoreward as fast as her stiffened limbs would permit.

As she drew near the barabara she was amazed to find that despite the cold weather the door was open. An instant later she was looking on the wild disorder of a room in which two torn, shock-haired, bleeding men struggled on the floor. A woman stood over them with upraised club. A woman . . . was she dreaming . . . ?

"Zoya! Zoya!" her cry of recognition rang out, as she sprang toward the creole girl.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR a moment the dim light of the wall-lamp fell on the four figures frozen in a tableau of astonishment—one man kneeling on the chest of the other, the two girls clasped in one another's arms. The spell was broken by Feodor, who appeared in the doorway, and after one unbelieving look at his sister, leaped toward her with a glad cry.

At the same moment Gary, aware that he must act quickly before Nash recovered, sprang up and jerked the clothes-line from its place over the stove. When Sasha turned from the embracing brother and sister, he had rolled the feebly struggling trader over on his face and was tying his ankles.

"Nicolai! What does this mean?" she cried in amazement. Then without waiting for an answer her hostile eyes sought Gary. "What are *you* doing here?"

Nettled by the injustice in her tone and manner, he looked up from under his disordered black hair and retorted:

"Ask Nash."

With a final twist to the knot he rose, the angry blood pounding in his veins, and without another glance at her, crossed to the water pail where he turned his back to drink. When he faced the room again the girl was down on her knees trying to undo the knots in the handkerchiefs that bound Nash's wrists.

Gary swung over to her and ignoring her indignant protests, gently but firmly took her fingers away.

"Before you let him loose," he advised, "you'd better hear what he has to say."

The trader twisted himself into a sitting position with his back against the bunk. His face was demonic with mortification and helpless fury.

"Tell me, Nicolai," the girl demanded, "what does he mean? What is he doing here?" She indicated Gary with a scornful tilt of her head.

Nash remained silent, his eyes smoldering, his jaw set in a white line.

"Zoya—" she took a step toward the creole girl. "How is it that you also are here?"

Zoya looked fearfully at Nash but did not speak.

For a tense, surcharged moment Sasha's eyes moved from face to face. "Will no one answer me?" she cried. "Come, Nicolai! Say something! Every minute is precious. I've got to go to Seward tonight, Nick. *Tonight,* do you hear?" She shook him by the shoulder. "We've found—think of it, Nicolai—we've found the Mask of Jade!" Her voice rang on the last words.

The trader glanced up but did not break the black silence that seemed to be eating into his soul.

"Think what it means, Nick! I can pay my debt to you now—if we reach Seward before the time expires. . . . Oh, Nicolai, I've three hundred miles to go —and only the *Seal Pup* is fast enough to get me there on time. . . . "

When the man made no comment, she dropped to her knees beside him, her hands desperately seeking his shoulders. "Oh, . . . Nick, Nick," she implored,

"only you can help me! Won't you speak—won't you speak to me?"

The steel-like look in Gary's eyes faded as he watched the girl. He crossed over to her and held out his hand.

"Get up Sasha," he said gently. "You don't have to sell your Mask of Jade now. All your foxes are here on Oo-koon. That's the reason Nick can't answer you."

An hour later in the barabara Sasha sat curled up on the bunk, her eyes dazed and wondering, her chin sunk thoughtfully in the palm of her hand. She was in full possession of the facts concerning the raid on Rocking Moon and she knew now that the notes and sketches found in Gary's room were merely a writer's aid to realistic fiction. On the other hand, Gary had learned of his own part in the recovery of the Mask of Jade, which he had unknowingly dug up from the hiding place no doubt selected by old Seenia five years ago, before her memory began to fail.

Watching Sasha now from across the room, Gary would have given much to know her thoughts. Had she promised to marry Nash? Had she lost her faith in men, in Nash, or did she love him, after all—the man who at this moment lay bound in the cabin of the *Seal Pup* awaiting the hour when they should leave Oo-koon for Kodiak to turn him over to the marshal? Gary felt a deep sympathy for the girl in this coming ordeal. She had been through so much in the last three days—and she had yet to learn of the part Nash had played in Zoya's sordid tragedy.

So had Feodor, for that matter. Gary had placed the creole on guard in the outer cave, armed with a

rifle from the *Seal Pup*. Zoya had gone to talk with her brother, and the young man realized suddenly, that she had been gone some time. The disturbing thought came—she might be telling Feodor about Nash. If she told him, Gary knew that no power on earth could prevent the trader from becoming a target for the creole's bullet.

He came to his feet uneasily. Aroused from his absorption he was conscious that he had for some minutes been hearing an alien sound mingling with the crash of surf on the beach. With a word to Sasha he crossed to the door and went out. Through the semi-transparency of the night he saw the launches rocking at the float. Some one stood there gazing seaward. The fluttering shawl told him it was Zoya. Was she going aboard the *Seal Pup,* he wondered? Then he started forward with an exclamation of dismay. There were only three launches at the float. The *Seal Pup* was gone!

His startled gaze swept the Cove. Midway a dark moving object rose and fell on the water. A second later Gary was leaping down the path toward the float.

Zoya turned as he drew near her. Under her blowing black hair her face was white and tear-stained and her dark eyes held an anguished look of farewell. Before he could speak she said simply,

"I love him, and I let him go."

Gary stared at her for an incredulous second, then with a smothered oath sprang aboard the *Simmie and Ann* and disappeared below just as Sasha came running down from the barabara.

"Oh, Zoya—he got away?" Sasha's voice was a

queer commingling of surprise and relief. Zoya nodded. Instinctively the two girls drew together and with clasped hands stood looking out at the vanishing launch.

"Siberia . . . freedom . . ." Sasha's half-whispered words conveyed her knowledge of the fugitive's destination, but there was a set look to her mouth and her watching eyes were cold. Nicholas Nash was escaping in the blackest hour that comes before the beginning of dawn. After a long moment she added: "Siberia . . . *exile* . . . " Then slowly her face softened and a hint of sorrow, of forgiveness crept into her eyes that rested for the last time on the lonely little *Seal Pup* beating out past the rocks of Oo-koon to the North Pacific . . . Suddenly her hand came up in the old gesture of farewell she and Nick had used since childhood.

"Good-bye, Nicolai," she said, sadly. "Good-bye . . . ."

She was turning to put her arms about the weeping Zoya when a faint cough from the *Simmie and Ann's* engine arrested the action. She started, listened, and as comprehension flashed in her eyes, her swift flying feet were carrying her aboard her launch and down into the engine room, where Gary, in his shirt-sleeves, was bent over the fly-wheel working at it desperately. He gave it a backward pull just as Sasha fell upon him grasping his arms. "Oh, no, no, Gary! Let him go! Let Nicolai go——"

A new and flaming-eyed Gary jerked himself upright, two grimy hands grasped her white clad shoulders and set her, none too gently, to one side.

"Let him go!" he blazed. "Let that fellow go, the

contemptible, two-faced pirate, after he's robbed every poor beggar of a fox-rancher from here to Ketchikan? God! What kind of a man do you think I am!" Grim determination tightened his lips as he veered again to the engine; but Sasha outraged by the scorn in his tones, and his unwonted treatment of her, lashed out in sudden passion.

"How—how *dare you!* How dare you talk to me so! Get off my launch!"

He whirled to face her. In the dim, smoky engine-room, a-reek with gasoline, the two confronted each other, tensed, furious, stripped for the moment of the glamour of sex. Then, though Gary's eyes softened, he stepped toward her decisively and as if she had been a child, caught her up in his arms and carried her struggling to the deck. A second later he set her gently down on the float beside Zoya.

"I'm right, Sasha. And I'm going after him," he said firmly; and before she could recover herself, he had leaped back aboard the launch.

"Wait, Sasha!" It was Zoya who halted the maddened girl. "He cannot follow, *solnishko.* Nicolai has wrecked the engines in ever-ry boat." And she drew the girl toward the trail that led up to the lighted barabara.

It was some time before Gary found that all three launches had been effectively put out of commission, and by then he had calmed down sufficiently to realize that pursuit of Nash, even if it were possible, would avail little. The trader's launch had twice the power of any boat at the float.

He went up on the deck of the *Simmie and Ann* and looked about him in the growing light. The Cove lay

empty after the disappearance of the *Seal Pup*. The girls had gone up to the barabara and the light was out. With the coming of dawn and the receding tide the wind had died away. A strange peace was falling on the Cove of Oo-koon. In the cool, fresh air his body and his mind rapidly became normal. But his heart was heavy. No need now to ask himself whether or not Sasha loved Nick Nash. Her actions of half an hour ago had convinced him that she did.

He glanced up at the closed door of the barabara, and shook his head. Then once more went below to the engine of the *Simmie and Ann*. He would put it in commission and as soon as the girls had slept an hour or so, they would all start for Kodiak to bring back the marshal.

Contrary to his expectations it took him less than half an hour to find the trouble and put the engine in order again. As he came up into the little cabin, his gaze wandered to the bunk and held on the square, brass-bound box he himself had dug up at the tomb the night before. He sat down on the edge of the bunk and took it between his hands. It was unlocked. He lifted the cover and shoved back the thick pad on top.

There it lay wedged securely in a padded, worn lining of ivory-colored velvet—the eyeless Mask of Jade, the precious relic of the old barbaric days before Alaska knew the foot of a white man!

He looked with interest on the dark-green, creamy textured silicate, shaped to the likeness of a strong, primitive face. It was only life size, but about the edges were openings by which it had been fastened in a wooden frame which had rested on the shoulders of the wearer. Across the broad forehead and on the

cheeks were minute, exquisite carvings like the intricate patterns of tattoo on the face of a Maori chief. As he slowly turned it over and over in his hands, the grotesque beauty of the thing began to fascinate him. Its inner surface was suave, satiny under his lingering palms. He felt, in some occult way, that it was saturated with centuries of history, centuries of primeval romance and mystery.

Under the spell of it his mind went back to the Cave as it must have been over ten decades ago. He saw the blackened vault a-stir to the swinging of a hundred mummies, while the rhythm of breaking surf crept in, and an Aleut beauty, in the Mask of Jade, swayed below in a weird, sea-born dance. He saw the Cave as it was last night, a cache for stolen furs, with a man hidden behind bales of fox skins, peering down on the dimly lighted, rough bearded faces of the pirates below. He saw the hidden man leap to the floor among them, dash to the sliding wedge, and freeing it of its peg, escape to the bleakness of the snowy beach. . . . The writer in him stirred . . . awakened. . . . Half-formed phrases came to him; bits of plots danced before him tenuous, tantalizing; then suddenly he had his story! The title flashed clear on the white pages of his mind: *The Mask of Jade!*

He sprang to his feet, his eyes alight with visions. He knew that at last he had recaptured his lost kingdom, and he never could lose it again. He wanted to shout: "I can write! I can write!" He wanted to tell Sasha about it immediately.

With the air of a conqueror he went out on deck, and unthinkingly started off the float toward the barabara. Then recollection sent him with lagging footsteps back

to the launch. He dropped to a coil of rope on the afterdeck and sat, chin in his hands, looking wistfully at the closed door of the barabara. What good would his writing do him if—if there were always a closed door between him and Sasha? What would it profit him if he gained the world—if Sasha were lost to him?

He began to review his heated actions of an hour ago. He was a brute, an arrogant, peremptory brute who had laid his heavy hands on those slim shoulders that had been bearing so many burdens of late. He remembered now, with a sort of amazed horror of himself, that he had left the marks of his grimy hands on the white wool of her mackinaw when he roughly shoved her aside in the engine room. Why hadn't he been more patient, more gentle with her—this little girl-woman who only last night had brought the *Simmie and Ann* safely through a danger most men would have refused. He stood aghast at himself, when he recalled that flaming, sexless moment when he and the girl had plumbed the depths of—was it hatred—in each other's eyes? Then a second later, with a warming surge of tenderness, he knew that somehow, because of that moment, his love for Sasha Larianoff was deeper, more vital than it had ever been before. And more hopeless, he added to himself, with a dejected glance toward the barabara.

In his dull misery he noted the snowy, barren land back of the hut, slanting upward to the top of Oo-koon. As if in mockery the brilliant winter sunrise was just beginning to tint the lip of the crater with rose. His tired eyes came back to rest on the closed door, and his heart gave a leap. It was closed no longer. Sasha's

little white figure stood framed between the rough portals.

As he sprang to his feet she saw him, and came down the path. He went to meet her. In the morning light her eyes were weary and her face pale, but as they drew together she looked up at him with a hint of her old dauntless smile.

"I couldn't sleep, Gary. I came down to tell you that—that you were right." She held out her hand, and he took it eagerly in both his own. "I . . ." At the soft, rapt expression of his face her words faded in a tremulous, questioning note. She caught her breath, and for an exquisite, wondering moment they stood with clinging hands reading each other's eyes.

Then he drew her little figure into his arms, while back of them, down the snowy slopes of Oo-koon. crept the slow rose light of dawn.

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